FANTASTIC

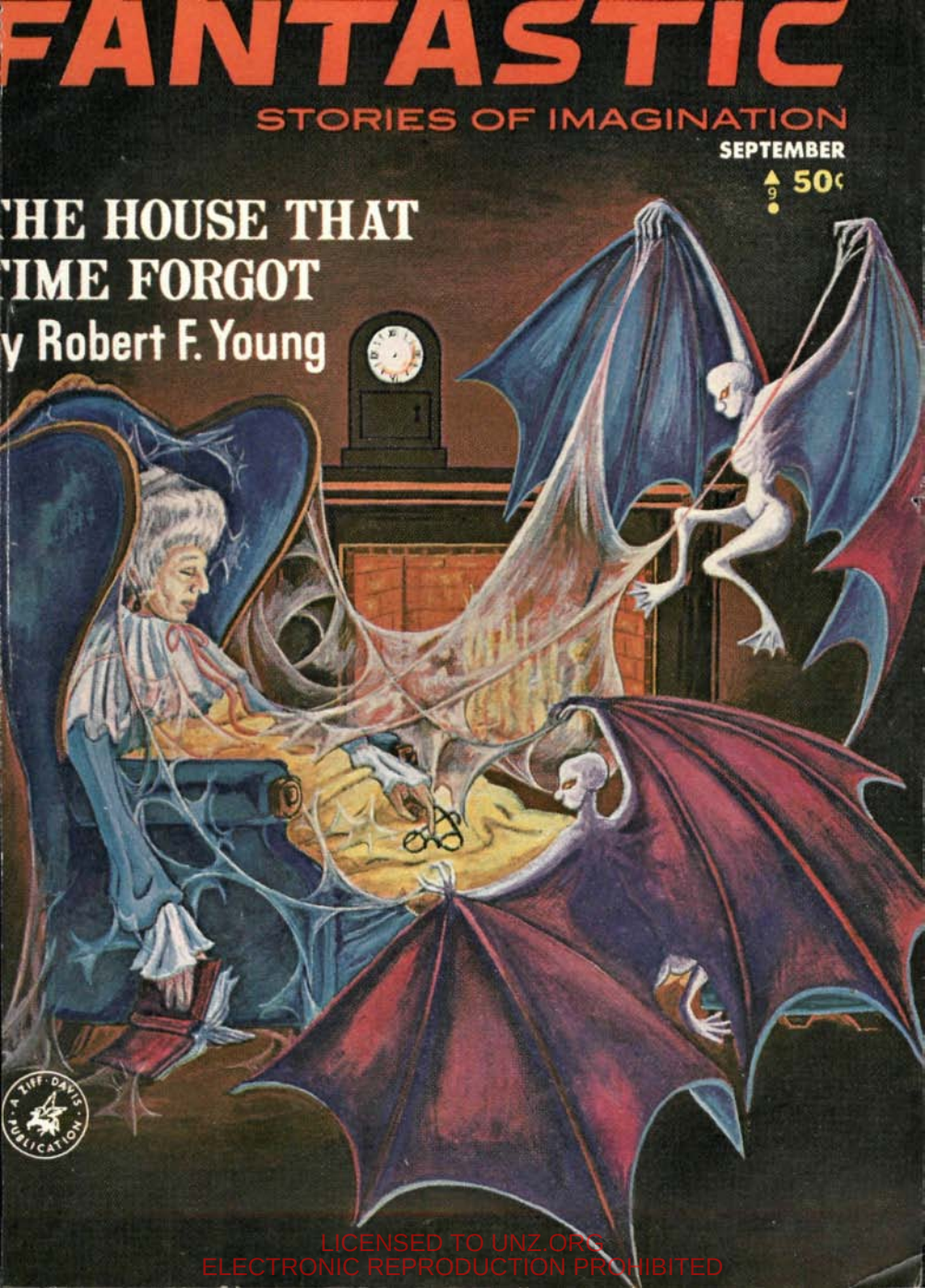
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

SEPTEMBER

50¢

THE HOUSE THAT TIME FORGOT

by Robert F. Young



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STORIES OF IMAGINATION

SEPTEMBER 1963
Volume 12 Number 9

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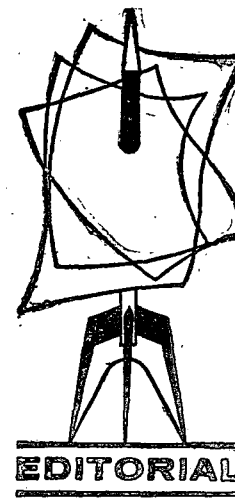

IT'S funny, but although the so-called hard-headed people in this world are always denying the possibilities of extra-sensory perception, they are also always cautiously experimenting with it. It's a sort of schizophrenic, "I-don't-believe - it - exists - but - let's - check - on - it - because - if - it - does - we - want - to - control - it." If ESP ever really becomes fact, it may be necessary to mount a campaign: "ESP for Supernormals Only."

The latest development has been a large-scale research investigation into ESP by the U.S. Air Force. Nearly 50 volunteers worked for about a year at the Air Force's Cambridge Research Laboratories in such areas as precognition, clairvoyance and telepathy. The object of the study was not to see whether such ESP talents existed, but to develop an objective test of the phenomena, to provide a basis of "authoritative" knowledge. Presumably the many years of experimentation by Dr. Rhine and others at Duke University are not considered "authoritative" by our military.

The research centered around tests made with Veritac, a computer which generated random numbers from zero through nine, and recorded responses and reaction times of the subjects. The subjects were asked either to predict the number which would next be generated (precognition) or to identify a number generated in another room (Clairvoyance or telepathy). According to the Air Force, the year's work showed that none of the 45 subjects had any unusual ESP ability, or, indeed that any such thing as psi power exists.

The Air Force did say it got some interesting information on "decision-making as a function of the personality makeup"—which sounds to us just a bit more far-out, as a concept, than ESP itself. It also said research would continue. Other psi research is going on at universities in America, Europe and significantly?—Russia. There has never been any intent to use psionics (if it exists) in military operations, the Air Force sources said.

Wanna bet?—NL.

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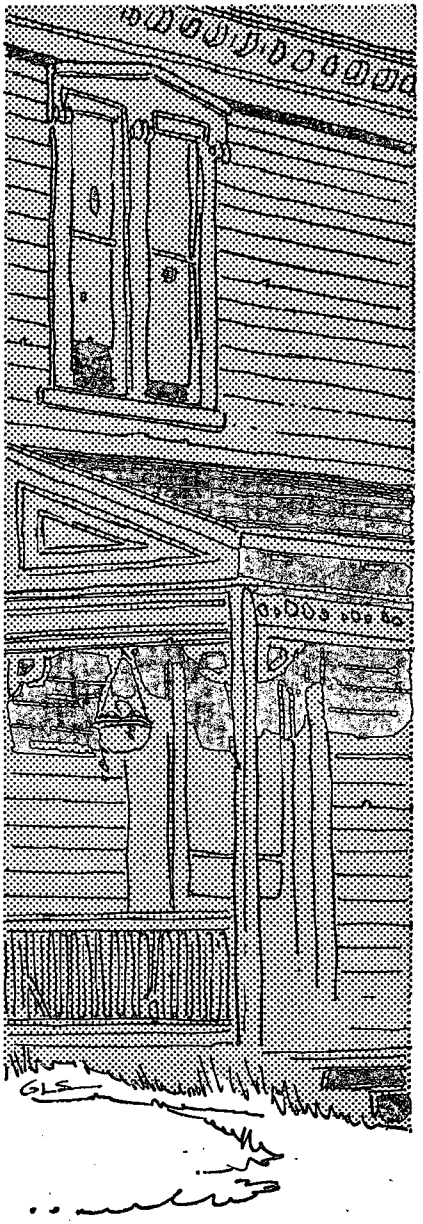
The House That Time Forgot

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrator SCHELLING

For want of a better name, she called them "Obbly-Gobblies". Thus far, the only evidence of their presence in the house had been an occasional flapping of their wings, but just the same she was certain that the term fitted them.



NODDING in the wing-back chair before the brightly blazing fire, she heard the flapping again—the dismal sweep of leathery tissue against stagnant, overheated air. "Come," she said, "I know you don't like me, but you are my guests you know, so the very least you can do is reveal yourselves and sit down and keep me company while you're deciding how to dispose of me."

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She had a hunch that her hospitality disconcerted them, because no sooner had she spoken than the flapping faded away. Probably, she reflected, they were accustomed to people who shivered in their shoes at the mere thought of death, or maybe they were so used to being hated that not being hated hurt their feelings. No doubt it was difficult for them to go about their dirty work in a congenial atmosphere.

Opening her eyes, she regarded the emptiness of the room. When you live in emptiness long enough, you can see it. Elizabeth Dickenson could, anyway. Of recent years she had become quite an expert in the field of emptiness. She put on the horn-rimmed spectacles which, when her eyes had started to go bad, she had resurrected from an old chest that had once belonged to her grandmother. They didn't entirely correct her presbyopia, but they were better than no spectacles at all. Picking up the book she had been reading, she chose a page at random and let her eyes rest briefly on its all-too-familiar words—

The face of all the world is changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole
Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink
Of obvious death, where I,
who thought to sink,
Was caught up into love.

WEARILY, she closed the book and let it drop to the floor beside her chair. She removed her spectacles and laid them on the yellow lap robe which she had drawn over her legs. She had heard *his* footsteps in the dim and distant future, and had let them go unanswered. She had never heard them again.

Flap-flap! went the melancholy wings.

She returned her gaze to the emptiness of the room. All of the furniture was gone now except her chair and her footstool, and her spool bed upstairs; but the emptiness had been there even when the rest of the furniture was present. In the beginning, she had sold the various pieces to pay her taxes; after that, she had burned them to keep warm. She had burned her books, too—save for the one that lay beside the chair. As for her bridges, she had burned them long ago. Now that the house had finally found itself, plenty of cordwood was available, but she couldn't order cordwood and expect to pay for it by means of a checking account that hadn't come into existence yet, and the same objection applied to the trees that stood in the yard. Presumably, she owned them, but

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she could hardly burn them in the fireplace or in the wood stove without first hiring someone to cut them down and saw and split them into appropriate dimensions. And besides, even assuming that she could manage to keep from freezing to death, what was to keep her from starving to death after her meager food-supply gave out? No wonder the obbly-gobblies had come!

On the mantel, a clock without hands stood. None of the other clocks in Elizabeth's house had had hands either, before they disappeared. As for calendars, she had dispensed with them almost from the start. In a way, the house was more of a time-ship than it was a house—a time-ship in which she had set sail for the islands of the past. But the sea of time had turned out to be a dark and treacherous river, and the river had been unkind. Equally as distressing, rats of memory had crawled on board before she had cast off, and down through the years she had heard them scrabbling in the darkness of long and lonely nights. But the obbly-gobblies were going to change all that. She liked the obbly-gobblies, Elizabeth Dickenson did.

The dismal flapping of their wings had faded away again. But she knew that they were still in the room. She could sense their presence. What were they waiting for? she wondered. She had known the minute she first heard them in the house that they had come to do her in. Why, then, did they not get on with the grisly task and have done with it? . . . She leaned back in the wing-back chair and closed her eyes. The flapping intensified. *Now I lay me down to sleep,* she thought, *I pray the obbly-gobblies my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the obbly-globblies my soul to take . . .*

THE house had an interesting history. In the phase we are concerned with here (in a different phase he was to build it), Theodore Dickenson discovered it when he came to Sweet Clover in 1882 to establish the Dickenson Grain-Machinery Company, and he fell in love with it at first sight. It was large and Victorian and built of red brick, and it stood all alone about a quarter of a mile outside the village on a dirt road that would someday be known as Linden Street. On the first floor there was a spacious living room, a huge library, a majestic dining room, a commodious kitchen, and a compact pantry; on the second floor there were six big bedrooms. The cellar was roomy and dry, and the untouched grounds—there was neither driveway nor walk—would lend themselves readily to landscaping.

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Upon making inquiries with a view to purchasing the place, Theodore learned a number of disconcerting facts: all of the villagers were familiar enough with the house, but none of them could remember who had built it, or when; apparently no one had lived in it for years, a circumstance which strongly suggested, to the majority of the villagers at least, that it was haunted; in the absence of either owner or heirs, the village of Sweet Clover had legally confiscated it and was eager to sell it for a song, provided the buyer could pay cash. Needless to say, this final fact was not nearly as disconcerting as the two previous ones, and Theodore, the recent recipient of a deceased uncle's modest fortune, wasted no time in taking advantage of the opportunity. He bought the house, plus a large lot on either side, and shortly afterward moved in with his wife Ann.

They went to work immediately on the desolate and dingy place, hiring painters, masons, and carpenters to refurbish it inside and out. Generally speaking, Victorian furniture was already losing its popularity in the year 1882, but in small towns like Sweet Clover it was still very much in vogue. Accordingly, Theodore and Ann furnished the entire house with the best Victorian pieces they could buy, supplementing them with *objects d'art* endemic to the era. Out of sentimentalism they retained the several pieces that had come with the house, and refinished them with loving care. In addition Theodore bought an imported harpsichord, hoping that his wife would take up music. Ann, however, gave the instrument a wide berth, and it was left all to itself in an unfrequented corner of the living room, there to gather dust and desuetude.

The Dickenson Grain Machinery Company, let it be said forthwith, was left to gather neither. Under Theodore's shrewd generalship and despite the depression then in progress, the factory grew from an infantile sprawl of shed-like structures into a proud young plant and brought a prosperity to Sweet Clover such as the little town had never known. In 1888, as though by way of reward, Ann bore him a son, whom they named Nelson and whom Theodore began grooming to take over the business almost from the moment the child began to walk. This process continued through puberty and adolescence, and meanwhile DGM survived three more depressions and matured into one of the most stable firms in the state.

NELSON turned out to be as shrewd a businessman as his father. In 1917, he married Nora James, a reticent girl two years

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his senior, but, as Theodore put it, "of good aristocratic stock." It was said around Sweet Clover that the main reason Nelson married her was to enhance his chances of not being conscripted under the newly-enacted Selective Service Act, but this was unjust to say in the least. Had Theodore desired to, he could have kept all of the young men in Sweet Clover out of the army, to say nothing of his own son. In any event, Nelson did not go to war, and in 1919, when his father died suddenly of a stroke, he took over both the House of Dickenson (as it was now referred to by the villagers) and DGM. A few months later, his mother died, bringing to a close a way of life that had endured in the house for thirty-seven years.

But only partly to a close. Nelson had inherited both his father's and his mother's sentimentalism, and as a result he was reluctant to disturb the atmosphere of their somewhat antiquated way of living. At the same time he was reluctant to go on staying in the house without investing it with some evidence of his own existence. Theodore and Ann had resisted change insofar as it involved furniture, and for the most part the House of Dickenson was still furnished with the same Victorian pieces they had bought when they first moved in. These pieces, however, had never been allowed to fall into disrepair, and, well-built to begin with, were in as good condition now as they had been originally. Nelson loved them, each and every one, but fortunately—or unfortunately, as the case may be—there was a limit to his love. New furniture was being manufactured every day, and he and Nora certainly had as much right to buy it as their less encumbered neighbors did. Moreover, there was no real reason why they shouldn't: it was perfectly possible to bring in the new and still retain the old, provided you used a reasonable amount of good taste and provided you weren't afraid to be a little bit unconventional. So he and Nora began replacing some, although by no means all, of the Victorian pieces with post-WW I furniture, in each case blending in the new with the old to the maximum extent possible. The result, when they completed the project, both surprised and enchanted them. Here was not heterogeneity, but charm—the charm of two worlds tied tastefully and unobtrusvely together.

In 1920, Nora gave birth to a son whom they named Byron, after her favorite poet. Byron, too, turned out to be an only child, but here any and all similarity to his father ended and similarity to his namesake began. He even looked like George

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Gordon, Lord Byron; certainly, he acted like him. In fact, the only thing that disqualified him for total identification was his disinclination to write poetry. Possibly it was this sole dissimilarity that heartened Nelson; in any event, despite the depression years that presently came along he saw to it that his son learned everything there was to know about the anatomy of DGM. WW II interfered considerably with his over-all plans, but did not completely dash them to the ground. Byron, as might have been expected, became a war hero; he also, as might have been expected, became involved in a fly-by-night wartime marriage that resulted in a baby girl whose custody became his and his alone when, at the end of the war, his wife left the child in a basket at the gate of the separation center where he was being processed for discharge and ran off with another man. Undaunted, Byron brought the child to the House of Dickenson and dared his parents not to love and adore it as much as he did, after which he settled down grimly and went to work at DGM, channeling his wild ways into souping up specimens of the new cars that presently began appearing on the post-war scene.

THE child's name was Elizabeth. From the beginning she was shy and sensitive, and, except for her father's, preferred no one's company to her own. Her father, she revered. It was not surprising that, living in an atmosphere predominated by antique furniture, Currier & Ives prints, and grandfather's clocks, she should come to prefer the old to the new; nor was it surprising that she should insist on taking lessons on the harpsichord which still stood in its unfrequented corner in the living room. She took to Bach the way a duck takes to water, and she came to love both Couperin and Scarlatti. Music, however, was far from being the major passion in her young life. She had begun to read almost as soon as she had begun to talk, and at the age of nine she had penned her first poem. Twelve found her with the three heroines who were to remain with her down through the years and upon one of those lives she was to model her own: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Georgina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson. Laughingly—and lovingly—her father bestowed upon her the nickname of "Elizabeth Georgina Dickinson".

Byron did his level best at DGM, but it was obvious from the beginning that he had inherited neither his father's nor his grandfather's business acumen. However, this did not prevent him from inheriting the factory when, in the summer of '60, both

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Nelson and Nora drowned when Nelson's cruiser capsized in an abrupt Lake Erie storm. Byron and sixteen-year old Elizabeth sat solemnly through church services and afterward stood solemnly in the cemetery beneath the tent that shrouded the two caskets, and when it was all over they rode solemnly back to the large and empty house. But neither of them grieved long. Byron had DGM on his shoulders now, and the unaccustomed responsibility sapped his mental and physical energies to a degree where all else seemed unreal; and as for Elizabeth, while she had loved her grandparents, the major part of her love had been—and still was—focused on her father, and she found that she could not carry her regret over their passing beyond penning a long poem in their memory. The poem finished, she penned others about more immediate subjects, and soon the summer was over and she was off to finishing school.

She had never liked regular school, and she liked finishing school even less. For one thing, it deprived her of the privacy she had come to take for granted in the House of Dickenson. There, her room had been her *sanctum sanctorum*, and having to share a room with two other girls was repugnant to her. However, she put up with it as best she could, penning her poetry in the dark with the aid of a small pocket torch which she flicked on after getting into bed and pulling the blankets up over her head. She wrote brief, sensitive stanzas for the most part, imagining them to be in the manner of Emily Dickinson. *Happiness*, she wrote one night—

I came upon you of a summer's day
When I was dancing with my shadow.

IN the summer of '62, she met Matthew Pearson, the young engineer whom her father had hired to expedite production at DGM. Although young with reference to his profession, he was still ten years older than Elizabeth, and while he was an eligible enough bachelor, he wasn't at all the sort of person someone who didn't know her very well would have dreamed she would fall in love with. Nevertheless, fall in love with him, she did. It was her first love, and her last, and she commemorated it on the very night of their meeting with the lines,

Breasting life's foothills I came upon him
Standing in the sun.
I had seen his eyes in the azure of autumn skies;
I had seen his hair in the blackness of winter woods.

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Autumn, winter—father-seasons:
Spring, I would bend thine ear!

For some time, things had been going badly at DGM. Since settling down after the war, Byron had kept his wildness steadfastly channeled into the driving of faster and faster automobiles, and recently he had found an ideal outlet for it in the racing of his new Ferrari in the hills beyond the town. But a lack of wildness does not necessarily imply a good business head, and Byron was but little more adept in industrial strategy now than he had been the first day he had taken DGM over. The company was a victim of technological change. Before Byron hired Matthew Pearson on the recommendation of Curtis Hannock, the company's lawyer, every operation was performed precisely as it had been performed in Nelson Dickenson's day, and as a result, the factory was unable to compete with its modernized cousins. The necessary changes should have been instituted ten years ago, and brought about gradually; the fact that they had not been was owing not so much to Nelson's inclination to cling to old, traditional ways as it was to Byron's failure to lend the initiative and to come up with the new ideas which the situation had required. Now, the changes needed to be made all at once, and the company's finances were unequal to the expense. Matthew Pearson had been able to expedite operations somewhat, but, as Byron refused to act on Curtis Hannock's advice to borrow enough money to buy and install the necessary new equipment, the firm had to limp along as best it could, picking up whatever contracts its competitors dropped in their eagerness to snare larger and more lucrative ones. The limp was rapidly becoming a shamble, more and more employees were being laid off, and Byron could be seen racing his Ferrari in the hills at more and more frequent intervals.

Elizabeth's romance with Matthew Pearson, a one-sided affair at first, with one party penning inspired imagery and the other party totally unaware of the affair's existence, kindled suddenly into a full-fledge flame. This came about when Matthew called at the House of Dickenson one evening to discuss a contemplated changeover at the plant with Byron. Quite by accident, he happened to be standing at the foot of the open stairway in the living room just as Elizabeth, wearing a girlish white dress, was coming down. She did not know it, for all her poetic lore, but there are times when, given the right lighting, the right moment, and the right mood, a tall, slender

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girl with no other claim to beauty than strong yet sensitive features and a natural grace of deportment can undergo a sort of transcendental transfiguration in the eyes of the beholder. It was so now. Matthew Pearson, newly come in out of a dismal rainy night, the warmth of the House of Dickenson rising reassuringly around him, the furniture of the House of Dickenson, its collective charm but little dimmed by the occasional modern atrocities that Byron had inserted here and there, spread out on either hand, saw a vision of loveliness that, however subjective it may have been, was destined to remain with him for the rest of his life.

After that, he became a frequent visitor at the house. What with the production problems that were continually arising at the factory he was never wanting for an excuse, and after he made his intentions known to Elizabeth late in '63, he did not need an excuse. He had never really needed one anyway, had he but known it; but Elizabeth, never demonstrative even in ordinary matters, had kept her love as deep and as dark a secret as she kept the poems she wrote in her room at finishing school. She graduated in the spring of '64, and she and Matthew announced their engagement. The announcement appeared in the *Sweet Clover Gazette* on the same day Byron Dickenson ran his Ferrari into a bridge abutment, impaled himself on the steering column, and neatly sheared off the top of his head.

THE flowers were the worst. Elizabeth loved wild flowers, but she hated domesticated blooms. She hated the chrysanthemums most of all. There were mums in every bouquet, in every wreath. The floral piece which she had ordered over the phone and which said "DAUGHTER" in ugly gilt letters was thick with them. It should have been woven of violets and forget-me-nots; of gentians and hepaticas and woodsorrels; of lupines, foxgloves, cinquefoils, and Queen Anne's lace. *How can I say how much I love thee when I have naught but stereotyped words at my command? I need the traceries of morning glories on a summer hill, or the gentle blueness of morning sun* . . . . . .

It was raining when the line of solemn cars filed into the cemetery, and the casket was set in place in the cement-block shelter which the modern-minded cemetery officials had had constructed in order that death could be consummated with a minimum of discomfort to its beholders. The shelter was painted grass-green, both inside and out, and had a damp, musty smell. People, some of whom had been Byron's friends

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and some of whom had been his enemies, crowded in and lined up behind the two chairs that stood before the casket. In one of the chairs, Elizabeth sat, in the other, Matthew Pearson. Byron had left friends and enemies, but in addition to his daughter the only relatives he had left was a scattering of cousins who lived too far away to make attending the funeral practicable.

Elizabeth sat silently, listening to the minister intone his time-worn words. She had not known about the shelter; she had expected to stand beneath a dripping tent. She would have liked to stand in the rain itself, to have felt it on her face. There was poetry in the rain, solace. Here in the shelter there was only indifference and death.

"—dust to dust—"

No, not dust. My father will never be dust. My father will be the wind. When you drive in the hills at night you will hear his voice. He will speak to you through the rolled-down windows of your cars, and he will say a thousand wondrous things. My father will be the wind! . . .

The flower that the minister had handed her was a chrysanthemum. She stood up and laid it gently on the casket. *This is a bluebell, father. I found it in the meadows south of town. I picked it because it made me think of your eyes—those gentle, understanding eyes that I shall never see again—*

Matthew was standing beside her. "Elizabeth, are you all right?"

"Yes." She looked up into his eyes. "Your eyes—they're like bluebells, too."

He took her arm. "Come, Elizabeth. It's time to go."

The House of Dickenson stood silently in the rain. Byron and Elizabeth had dispensed with the regular servants some time ago, and a cleaning woman came twice a week to do the rooms. Matthew helped Elizabeth out of the car and walked with her as far as the front door. "I hate to go running off to the city at a time like this," he said, "but it wouldn't be fair to the company if I didn't attend the Schwartz and Burghardt auction."

"Why can't you send someone else?"

"Because there isn't much money to play around with, and I've got to buy exactly what we need. Cheer up—it'll only be for a couple of days."

"Two days," she said. "Two centuries." She essayed a brave smile, almost brought it off. "Well, if you must, you must, I suppose."

"I'll tell you what. I'll ask Mrs. Barton to come over and keep you company. It's not her day to clean, but—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!

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If I want to hear banalities, I'll turn on TV. Go now, quickly,—I'm not a little girl."

"All right. I'll be staying at the Wilton Hotel—if you need me, don't hesitate to call." He kissed her. "Bye"

"Good by," Elizabeth said.

The trouble was, she *was* a little girl . . .

She watched him drive away, then she entered the house and removed her coat and hat. Looking neither to left nor to right, she walked into the living room and climbed the stairs to her room. The windows were raised, and the curtains were wet with rain. The modern little desk on which she wrote her poems and in which she hid them stood forlornly by an antique spool bed that was older than the house itself. Opened on her pillow lay a slender volume that was older than the house, too—*Sonnets by E.B.B.* She sat down on the bed, reached out and touched the faded words—

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly,
As once Electra her sepulchral urn,
And looking in thine eyes, I overturn
The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see
What a great heap of grief lay hid in me
And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn—

She could cry then. Afternoon darkened to dusk as she lay there on her silken coverlet, and presently night tiptoed into the room. Toward midnight, the rain stopped, and the stars came out. Lying on her back now, she could see them through the window by the bed. She counted the jewels of Orion's belt. She traced the little dog's tail. She marveled at the misted magic of Berenice's hair. At long last, she slept.

THE answer lay in the warmth and the brightness of the morning sunlight; in the sweetness of the morning wind. She put yesterday from her mind. *I will arise from my morning bed and go forth into the day. To the city will I go, to the canyons of the sun. Shower, spray and sparkle; needles on my skin. Rude awakenings are for those who gather dust in sad retreats and admit the myth of death.*

Down the street she walked in the morning shade of maples that sang sweet songs in the morning wind. At the station she caught the 9:45, and early-afternoon found her in the city. However, she did not go directly to the Wilton as she had planned. She would go there later on, after he returned from the auction. That would be better than waiting for him in his room like a frightened little girl. After all, she knew her way around the city, didn't she?

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of course, quite well, thank you.

She stopped in a little restaurant and had a cheeseburger and a glass of milk, then she took in a double-feature matinee. The first feature was about a girl who found love on a south Pacific island. The second was about Moses. She liked them both very much. When she got outside, she found that it was night already. Well no, not really night; traces of daylight still lingered in the eastern sky. Just the same, she had no business being all alone in the big city at such an hour.

She remembered where the Wilton was, and hadn't the least trouble finding it. She had been there with her father once before. For years, the Dickensons had patronized it whenever business brought them to the city, and it had become traditional for the executives of DGM to patronize it, too. She remembered the lobby as a dignified room with thick rugs and big velvet armchairs. Now, even though the rugs and the chairs were still there, it seemed dingy and cheap, and somehow out of date. It was as though many years instead of only a few had passed since she had last been there.

The lobby was empty. So was the space behind the counter where the clerk should have been. Well, no matter, she knew were the register was kept. She would peek, that was what she would do. The name puzzled her for a moment when she first found it. It didn't seem quite right. And yet it must be. After it were the numerals 304.

An elevator bore her aloft, and soon she was walking down a carpeted hall. The carpet was frayed, and the walls were badly in need of paint. The door she wanted was at the very end. Just before she reached it, it opened, and a girl came out.

She was a bright-haired girl who looked as though she had just come off a production line where girls like herself were turned out like new Fords and Chevrolets. Elizabeth felt gawky and out of place just looking at her, and shrank back against the wall. When she thought of the moment in later years, she invariably pictured herself as a sort of anachronistic Emily Dickenson taken unawares by a neatly packaged product she had not dreamed existed, and perhaps, in the back of her mind where her little-girl masquerade had not taken effect, she pictured herself that way then, because the pattern must have begun somewhere, and at what more logical place could it have begun than at the beginning?

The girl did not look at her. As a matter of fact, she did not even see her. Elizabeth might just as well have been a painting hanging on the wall, a painting of a

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tall, thin girl with deceptively strong features and blue eyes that had in them the look of a bewildered child. But if the bright-haired girl did not see her, the man standing in the doorway of 304 did—the man who was—And yet wasn't—the man she had come to see. Gray-suited, concerned of countenance, the rouge-remnants of a kiss blazing brightly on his cheek, he stepped into the hall. "Elizabeth, I never dreamed you'd—" he began, and stopped. "Elizabeth, are you all right? You look strange."

The painting of Elizabeth Dickenson did not move.

Matthew paused helplessly before it. "Liz, this is one of those crazy things that happen to people when they're not looking," he said. "I saw the Wilton letterhead on some old correspondence at the shop and automatically took it for granted that it was a respectable place. I didn't find out that it had turned into a dive till after I'd registered and paid two days rent in advance. One of the bellboys told me then that no one from DGM has stayed here for years, but I decided to stick it out anyway. I—I never dreamed they'd send up a girl."

Still, the painting did not move.

"Come in, and sit down, Liz. You're as white as a ghost. This whole thing had no business happening to us—no business at all."

The painting turned back into an animate girl then, and the girl whirled, and ran down the hall. Matthew followed her to the elevator, argued desperately while it rose to her summons; and all the while, the smear of lipstick burned more and more vividly. When the elevator arrived, Elizabeth stepped inside and watched the closing doors devour his anguished face. Boarding the train for Sweet Clover an hour later, she left the little girl she once had been forever behind her.

THE ship of the House of Dickenson, its doors closed tightly against the world, lay at anchor in the river of time.

Inside the house, young Elizabeth Dickenson sat in a wing-back chair before a fireless fireplace. For the dozenth time that day, the phone rang. For the dozenth time, she let it ring.

After a while, it stopped; then it began ringing again. She went on sitting where she was.

Before her on a small footstool, a tray rested. On it were the remnats of the piece of toast she had had for breakfast, and a cup half full of cold coffee. The hour was 4:16 P.M.; the day, the day after the day of the bright-haired girl.

Tires squealed in the driveway, the slam of a car door followed. The phone had finally fallen silent, and now, the doorbell commenced to ring. It rang

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and rang and rang. "I know it's you, Matt," Elizabeth whispered. "Go away—go away, please!"

Presently the ringing stopped, and the sound of the big brass knocker took over. Part of Elizabeth sprang to her feet, ran into the hall, and tried desperately to turn the knob that controlled the lock. But she was not strong enough. *Help me, help me!* she called to the rest of herself. *In a moment he'll be gone, and it'll be too late!*

The preponderance of herself did not move from the chair.

Are you going to let him go because what he did seemed twice as bad because you confused him with your father? Or are you going to let him go because deep down in yourself you were looking for an excuse all along to shut yourself away from the world and write poetry?

Elizabeth Georgina Dickinson did not answer.

Present the knocking stopped. A car door slammed. Once again, tires squealed.

Silence.

Elizabeth got up, went over to the Sheraton sofa table on which the phone stood, and dialed Curtis Hannock's office number. "This is Elizabeth Dickenson," she told the girl who answered. "Have you by any chance been trying to get in touch with me today?"

"Why yes, Miss Dickenson. All afternoon, as a matter of fact. Hold the line a moment, please—Mr. Hannock wants to speak with you."

"Elizabeth? Where in blazes have you been, girl?"

"It—it doesn't matter. What was it you wanted, Mr. Hannock?"

"To see you, of course, so that I can read you your father's will. How will it be if I drop around at two-thirty tomorrow afternoon?"

". . . All right. Should I get in touch with anyone else?"

"No. It concerns you, and you alone. Two-thirty then—right? Take care of yourself, girl."

AFTER hanging up, she stood for a while, staring at the wall. It was time to fix dinner, she supposed. She went out into the big kitchen and fried herself bacon and eggs and made a pot of coffee. The kitchen, with its plethora of modern appliances, was like another world—a world she didn't in the least appreciate. In remodeling it, Byron had gone all the way, but it could be said to his credit that he had junked none of the old equipment, some of which dated from Theodore Dickenson's day. Instead, he had stored it in the basement along with the various other period-pieces which both necessity and common sense had forced him to replace.

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Dinner over, she washed the dishes, dried them and put them away. Afterward, she watched TV in the library with all the lights out, ignoring the occasional ringing of the phone. Once, the doorbell rang. She ignored that, too. At ten-thirty, she went to bed and lay dully in the darkness of her room. Toward three o'clock in the morning, exhaustion at last caught up to her, and she fell asleep.

Curtis Hannock showed up promptly at 2:30 P.M. Thinning of hair, sharp of eye, he faced her across the big Chippendale table in the library. "Matt asked me to give you this," he said, tossing sealed envelope toward her, "and to tell you that if he doesn't get an answer, he won't bother you any more. Do you want to read it now, or would you rather wait till later?"

She let the envelope lie where it had fallen. "I'll wait till later."

"Very well." Hannock opened his brief case, spread out several papers on the table, and proceeded to read one of them. "All of which means," he said when he had finished, "that your father left you everything, or, to be more specific, the house and the factory. I'm sorry to say that his savings account is exhausted." Hannock raised his eyes. "Now, as to the house, there are no outstanding taxes, no mortgages, and the title seems to be clear enough, so you've no worries on that score. The factory, however, is a horse of a different nature."

"I want you to sell it," Elizabeth said.

"Hold your fire, now, girl. Wait till you hear the rest, and then make up your mind. Now, as you probably know, the plant's been in trouble for some time, and, as you probably also know, your father hired Matt in the hope of rejuvenating the place to a point where production would come somewhere near being on a par with other grain-machinery plants. But the trouble was, the company's finances wouldn't permit him to give Matt enough of a free hand, and although Matt's done the best anyone could have done under the circumstances, it hasn't been anywhere near enough. I advised your father to borrow the money that was needed for new equipment, but he wouldn't listen to me. I'd advise you to do the same, Elizabeth, and without the slightest hesitation; but fortunately I don't need to. After funeral expenses, and even after the bite which inheritance tax is going to take, the total of your father's life-insurance policies, of which you are the sole beneficiary and all of which contain double indemnity clauses, will be something like twenty thousand dollars. Sink every red cent of it into DGM girl—give Matt the free hand

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he needs. Take my word for it, it's the soundest investment you can possibly make, and the best and the cheapest security you'll ever be able to buy. It's downright foolishness even to think of selling out!"

"That may be, Mr. Hannock, but I want to sell out just the same, and the sooner, the better. And I want whatever profit that accrues from the sale to be set up, along with the insurance money, in an annuity certain, and the payments credited to my checking account at the Sweet Clover National Bank."

Hannock's face grew red, and the nostrils of his thin nose quivered slightly, "Dammit, Elizabeth, you're a bright and intelligent girl. You could even run DGM yourself, if you had to, and with Matt working for you, you couldn't go wrong. Take my advice and hang on to the place and give him free rein. It'll give you a healthy interest in life and take you out of yourself. You're too withdrawn, girl—you've always been too withdrawn. And now you're going to go whole hog and pull out of the picture altogether. I don't know what Matt did to hurt you, but I'll bet it doesn't amount to a hill of beans and I'll bet you've magnified that hill into a mountain. Take it from me girl—forgive him. Forget about what he did, and then go on from there."

Elizabeth stood up. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hannock. I can't."

Sweeping his papers into his brief case, he got to his feet. "Matt'll probably quit, you know that, I suppose." Abruptly, he shrugged his shoulders. "I'll be in touch with you, girl."

She accompanied him to the door. As he was about to depart, she touched his arm. "Will—will Matt be able to get another job all right?"

Hannock faced her. "It's kind of late in the day to be worried about that, isn't it?" Suddenly, pity came into his eyes. "Yes, yes, of course he'll be able to get another job." He turned away. "Take care of yourself, girl."

"Good by, Mr. Hannock."

After he drove off, she returned to the library. The envelope still lay on the Chippendale table. She looked at it for some time; then, resolutely, she picked it up, tore it into bits, and flung the bits into a nearby wastebasket. For a moment she thought she smelled smoke. It was an olfactory hallucination, of course, but in a sense the smoke was real. It was the smoke thrown out from the bridges that were burning behind her.

IN the first month of her expatriation, Elizabeth ordered a marker for her father's grave. But she did not go near the grave even after the marker was in

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place. Her groceries, she ordered over the phone. All of her bills, she paid by check, giving the letters to the mailman when he brought mail. She discontinued all of her magazine and newspaper subscriptions. She stopped listening to the radio. She no longer watched TV. Her contact with the world narrowed down to an occasional phone call from Curtis Hannock, an occasional letter (never answered) from one or another of her former acquaintances, an hello and a goodbye from the boy who delivered her groceries, and the peripatetic gossip provided by Mrs. Barton, who still came biweekly to clean the house.

As more months passed, her days acquired a flexible routine. She would arise at six-thirty in the morning, fix breakfast, eat, tidy up the kitchen, and then return to her room and write poetry till noon. At noon, she would prepare herself a meager lunch, after which she would go outside and work on the grounds, operating her father's power-mower when the height of the grass warranted, trimming the hedge that effectively shut out the sight of the street, or weeding the small kitchen garden which she had planted next to the garage. Around four o'clock, she would go back inside and start preparing her evening meal. There were days, of course, when she fixed baked beans or a roast, and on these occasions the dish would have been put into the oven some hours before, making the preparation of the rest of the meal relatively simple. Evenings, she spent for the most part playing Bach or Couperin or Scarlatti on the harpsichord, becoming more and more proficient as the days passed. Sunday was her day off. She would arise at eight or eight-thirty, go downstairs, fix herself a light breakfast, and linger over a second and sometimes a third cup of coffee; then she would get whatever main course she had decided on for Sunday dinner into the oven, after which she would retire to the wing-back chair in the living room and read her bible until noon. She would eat dinner around one o'clock, do the dishes, and then go into the library, select a book, and retire once more to the wing-back chair. She read indiscriminately, choosing whatever volume her mood of the moment dictated, and most of the time she was in the process of reading half a dozen books at once. In this way she browsed through such diverse fare as *The Charterhouse of Parma, Moby Dick, Das Schloss, Little Men, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Ulysses,* and *Swann's Way.* Some of these literary pilgrimages she had made before, but all of them, new and old alike, provided her with the companionship which

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she was wise enough to know she could not get along without.

SUMMER faded into fall. Elizabeth was shocked when she got her school tax. The village tax had already bled her for $364.65, and now she was confronted with the prospect of being bled for $502.19 more. For a furious moment she was tempted to sell the house; then she remembered all the cherished old things it contained, and sold Byron's other car—a '61 Chrysler that was gathering dust in the garage—instead. Curtis Hannock took care of the transaction, and the price took care of the tax nicely and left her with a few hundred dollars to spare. She had Hannock set the amount aside for the state and county tax, which would show its ugly face come January 1st.

The first snow fell, and Elizabeth made arrangements to have her driveway kept open for the rest of the winter. Not that she expected company—her acquaintances had long since given up ringing her doorbell, and, while she had finally gone back to answering her phone, most of the calls she now received were "wrong numbers"—but there was the grocery boy to be considered, not to mention the milkman and Mrs. Barton. The latter's "news-service" grew more and more extensive with each successive visit, and sometimes when the old woman got in the door Elizabeth despaired of ever getting her back out. *Item*: Amelia Kelly had just had another baby, which made four to date, and her husband not working and them living on his unemployment-insurance checks! *Item*: The new owners of the Dickenson Grain-Machinery Company had shut down the factory till after the holidays, and all those poor employees with no money for Christmas! *Item*: Sid Westover, whose weather predictions had never been wrong yet, was down with lumbago again, so everybody might just as well resign themselves to a long, cold winter. *Item*: It was said that Matt Pearson, who had quit DGM when the new owners had taken over and returned to his home town to work in a new factory being opened there, was keeping steady company with his boyhood sweetheart, and any day now wedding bells were expected to ring. *Item*: Wasn't it just awful about the Gilbert boy running his father's car into the tailend of a semi and killing himself? In the middle of January, Elizabeth paid the old woman off and told her that because of mounting taxes and the ever-climbing cost of living she had decided to economize by doing her own housework. "Humph!" Mrs. Barton said, and stamped out.

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In mid-March, Elizabeth received a phone call from Curtis Hannock. He would have called sooner, he told her, but he had just heard the news himself: on March 4th, while helping to unload a vertical lathe at the Valley-Ville branch of Fulcrum Industries, Inc., Matt Pearson had been crushed to death when the machine slipped off its rollers, overturned, and pinned him to the floor.

LET us take the years, the long and lonely years, and watch their slow, sad passage. There are two times—remember that. The time of the world and the time of the house—the present, and the past.

Elizabeth rising, Elizabeth dressing, Elizabeth descending the stairs. Elizabeth writing poetry, Elizabeth playing Bach, Elizabeth crying in her room at night . . .

Elizabeth Georgina Dickinson growing old.

The grounds, once so meticulously maintained, become more riotous with the passing of each spring. Paint peels from once-bright cornices and sills. Bricks darken with dampness and with grime. Each week, groceries are delivered, and deposited on back-porch steps that have seen far better days, there to be picked up by Elizabeth and taken hurriedly inside. Elizabeth no longer knows the sun or the rain; she runs at the sound of the milkman's tread, starts at the barking of dogs. Her only meetings with the night are the trips she takes in winter from the house to garage to bring in fireplace wood, two cords of which are split and delivered each year by a farmer she has never seen.

Nor has Elizabeth seen the city in which she lives. Oh yes, Sweet Clover is part of a city now. It was a part of a city before, although no one was aware of it—part of a vast megalopolis that spread all the way from Cleveland, Ohio to Buffalo, New York. Now, the megalopolis has come into its own and eaten Sweet Clover up, and all the green land around Sweet Clover, and the flowers and the trees. It would surprise Elizabeth to know that the farmer who delivers her cordwood is not in the strict sense of the word a farmer at all, but a "general supplier" who left his name with the "Bureau of Services" whose number "information" gave her when she dialed and asked where she might obtain wood to burn in her fireplace.

There is one thing, though, that Elizabeth knows: she knows that her property has tripled in value. Innumerable strange voices over the phone have importuned her to sell—in vain, of course—and her taxes have

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soared into the stratosphere. So high into the stratosphere, in fact, that it requires the better part of her income to pay them. She thinks that the house itself is responsible for this state of affairs, but she is wrong. The land on which the house stands is responsible. It is the only green land left in the city, and the city officials want to buy it and turn it into a public park. It is perhaps better that Elizabeth does not know this, because turning the land into a public park would mean tearing down the house, and the house is her world. And then again, perhaps it would be better if she did know it. She might change her mind about dying intestate then, and see to it that her property falls into less iconoclastic hands. But in the long run, none of this will matter. In the long run, a slightly different scheme of things will exist, and no doubt the city will get its park without even half trying.

THAT fall, Elizabeth's school tax came to $1540.19. She scrimped for four months, but by the time she accumulated enough to pay it the state and county tax —now called the "megalopolis tax" came in with the amount of the unpaid school tax added on. The over-all amount was a demoralizing $2536.21.

Somehow, she had to raise the money. If she didn't, the next tax would put her so far behind that she would never be able to catch up. Her one contact with the world, Curtis Hannock, had been dead these many years, so she could not turn to him for help; and since her annuity was fixed, the only way she could raise money as far as she could see (other than by mortgaging the House of Dickenson, which was unthinkable) was by selling some of her possessions. The question boiled down to a matter of which of them she cared for least, and she had no trouble arriving at the answer: the "newest" ones, of course.

She took an inventory of the furniture, the appliances, the pictures, the dishes, the bric-a-brac, and the books, jotting down the approximate age of each item. Then she made a chronological list, after which she grouped the items into general age-categories. They fell naturally into four groups: the "pre-Dickensonian" period, the "Theodore and Ann" period, the "Nelson and Nora" period, and the "Byron and herself" period. It went without saying that the latter group must be the first to be sacrificed.

She went through the house, inspecting each item individually. With rare exceptions, everything that she and her father had bought had by this time degenerated into junk. She had

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known of course that some of it was junk—the refrigerator, for one example, which had given up the ghost decades ago, and the television set, for another, which had conked out less than a year after the beginning of her expatriation and which she had never bothered to have fixed. But she had had no idea that the "modern"furniture had reached quite the sad state of affairs she found it in. Would she be able to get anything at all for such a sorry collection of keepsakes? she wondered. She would see.

"Seeing" involved doing something she had not done for years —coming face to face with another human being. But she had no choice, and when the collector to whom the Bureau of Services relayed her phoned request came around, she met him stanchly at the door. It is difficult to say which of them was the more taken aback. The collector saw a tall, gaunt woman, strong of features and silver of hair, clad in clothing that for all its immaculateness was at least half a century old. Elizabeth saw a short, pumpkin-bellied man, round of face and grass-green of hair, clad in a hair shirt with the hairside turned outward, leaf-green, calf-length trousers, and a pair of black shoes with long, snaky toes that brought to mind the roots of a small tree. In any event, it was the collector who recovered first. The minute Elizabeth ushered him into the living room, he headed straight for the harpsichord and said, "I'll buy this, two hundred dolla."

Elizabeth shook her head. "That isn't one of the items that's for sale. I'll show you those which you may buy."

SHE did so, conducting him from room to room, steering him away, with ever-increasing difficulty, from the Theodore-and-Ann and the Nelson-and-Nora pieces. When they got back to the living room, he said, "For the junk in the kitchen, two dolla, for the trash-furniture in this room, six dolla, for the pila books in the next room, ten dolla . . . For the harpsichord, two hundred dolla, for the Victorian, Sheraton, and Empire beds, two hundred dolla, for the copper-clock upstairs, fifty dolla, for the grandpop clock downstairs, fifty dolla, for the Hepplewhite sideboard in the eating room, two hundred dolla, for the copper-strip bookcase in the hall, one hundred dolla—"

"But those pieces aren't for sale," Elizabeth objected. "Besides, the prices you're quoting are much too low."

The collector shrugged. "They're standard twenty-first century prices, lady. Antiques don't sell high-wise no more."

An inspiration struck Eliza-

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both. "I just remembered—there are some other things in the basement. Would you care to look at them?"

"Show me."

He offered her "one hundred dolla" for the lot, magnanimously exempting an ancient pre-Dickensonian stove and an ancient pre-Dickensonian sink, both of which he agreed to have his "haulaway boys" set up in the kitchen for her. The offer, however, was contingent upon her selling him the other items he had enumerated, plus a collection of Tarentum glassware which he had spotted in one of the kitchen cupboards. Elizabeth sighed. "I don't seem to have much choice, do I?" she said. She stood up straighter. Very well—but the spool bed in my room is excepted, and I must have enough for the glassware to bring the over-all amount to a minimum of one thousand dolla—dollars. If you like, I'll throw in the livingroom rug."

The collector made a face. "All right—one thousand dolla."

The house seemed naked after the "haulaway boys" had done their work and departed. There were poignant ellipses in the furniture, empty, and half empty rooms. The worst emptiness of all was the corner where the harpsichord had stood . . . Wearily, Elizabeth endorsed the check which the collector had left, made up the difference with a check of her own, and enclosed both checks in an envelope along with her tax receipts. She addressed the envelope, laid it, along with a third check—this one for twenty cents to cover postage—atop the mailbox outside the door, and weighted both items down with a small stone which she kept on hand for such purposes. The gas bill was due any day now, and when the mailman delivered it he would pick up the letter and mail it. She still thought of "him" as the "mailman", even though she knew that a purple-haired woman wearing a yellow uniform that looked like a scuba outfit and riding in a scotter-like cart now did the delivering. She had glimpsed her once through the hall window, put-putting up the walk, and once had been enough. Elizabeth seldom looked out her windows anyway. Even in winter the trees and the overgrown shrubs that surrounded the house effectively concealed the world that lay beyond her boundary lines, and that was as it should be. It was a world she wanted even less part of than the world she had left behind her nearly half a century ago.

THE idea of traveling into the past had never occurred to her, and it did not occur to her now in precisely those words. She merely noted as the days

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went by that the house, bereft now of virtually all its tie-ins with the "future", had a new and refreshing flavor. This flavor grew on her, and to bring it out in greater purity she began carrying the various odds and ends that did not jibe with it out to the garage. Gradually, this weeding-out process became an obsession with her, and hardly a night passed that she did not dispose of at least one "anachronistic" object. She excepted the "modern" desk in her bedroom at which she still wrote her poetry, and there were of course certain aspects of the "future" that defied elimination. The "modern" electrical fixtures, for example. The house had been wired in Nelson and Nora's day, but it had been rewired since, and none of the original fixtures remained. For a while she considered tearing the new ones out, but fortunately she still had enough common sense left to dissuade her, and she got around the incongruity by ordering a gross of candles and burning them instead of the electric lights. Some nights she would even dispense with candles, having discovered that she could read equally as well by firelight as she could by candlelight. Afterward, she would light a candle and climb the stairs to her room, pretending that the comfortable warmth of the house emanated, not from the automatic electric furnace which she herself had had installed circa 1990 when the gas furnace had breathed its last, but from the fire she had just left.

Reading one February night in her wing-back chair, she became obsessed with the notion that all was not quite as it should be. Something in the house (aside from the writing desk in her room, the light fixtures, and the telephone on the Sheraton sofa table) did not quite tie in with the Nelson-and-Nora atmosphere she had recreated. Her gaze roamed the shadows, lingered in this dark corner and that, and returned presently to the book lying on her lap. The name of it was *Bolts of Melody; New Poems of Emily Dickinson.* Surely the poems of Emily Dickinson belonged in the world of Nelson and Nora. Yes—generally speaking, they did; but these particular poems bore a 1945 copyright and had not previously been published. Therefore, they did *not* belong. Even if they had belonged, the book itself wouldn't have. It would simply have to go.

So would the other books Elizabeth had overlooked. There proved to be ten of them altogether. One by one, she threw them into the fire. She saved *Bolts of Melody* till the last, and a tear glistened evanescently on her cheek as she laid the treasured volume on the flames. The

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cover darkened, curled. The pages turned red, then black. Ashes rose like small gray ghosts, and drifted up the chimney—

SUDDENLY the house shuddered, and simultaneously the room filled with warm radiance. The light came from old-fashioned tasseled lamps and from a ridiculous chandelier consisting of painted cardboard candles with flame-like bulbs. In the empty spaces between the furniture, other furniture had appeared—furniture that matched the Nelson-and-Nora pieces and blended with the Theodore-and-Ann pieces; that went well with the lamps and the chandelier. The brown discoloration of the walls had been supplanted by flowery wallpaper; the once-lackluster woodwork gleamed. A young man sat reading a newspaper on a mohair sofa that a moment ago had not existed. A not-quite-so-young woman, bearing a tray on which stood a small teapot and two quaint cups, entered the room. Both the man and the woman wore clothing that dated from the early post-WW I period. Elizabeth stood transfixed, for the man was her grandfather and the woman was her grandmother—Nelson and Nora, happy in the home that was now theirs, the home they had just tastefully furnished with the new while still retaining the old.

The illusion—if illusion it was—faded away. Lights dimmed, went out, disappeared. The "new" furniture turned back into empty spaces; the walls resumed their brown discoloration, the woodwork lost its sheen. Nelson and Nora dissolved into empty air. It was as though a moment had come—and gone.

Looking at the walls, Elizabeth saw that the electrical fixtures were missing. Looking at the clock on the mantel, she saw that it had no hands.

She lit a candle and went through the downstairs rooms. None of the clocks had hands and some of them—the new ones which she had overlooked in her weeding-out operation—had disappeared. So had the cupboards that Byron had had built when he remodeled the kitchen. So had the inlaid linoleum on the kitchen floor. She went upstairs. So had the writing desk that contained every poem she had ever written.

At least her bed was still there, and her sheets and blankets and pillows. The bed, being pre-Dickensonian, would have been exempt in any case, but the sheets and blankets and pillows were relatively new. Maybe what had happened to the house had affected only those articles that were an integral part of the house. Frightened, broken-hearted, she undressed and slipped beneath the covers. She blew out

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the candle and closed her eyes. Lying there, she tried to reassure herself. She had been living alone too long—that was it. She had let her obsession with the past get the best of her common sense. In the morning, her common sense would be back at the helm, and everything would be back to normal again.

But morning did not come.

SHE could not believe it at first when she awoke to total darkness. She had slept for at least eight hours, and daybreak should have been on hand. She lit her candle, got out of bed, and went over to the window. Blackness lay beyond the panes, blackness unrelieved by the faintest gleam or sparkle or particle of light.

Standing there, she became aware of the intense cold. Had the furnace gone out? Slipping into her blue dressing gown, she hurried downstairs. The living room was like an ice box, the kitchen was like a deepfreeze. Holding her candle before her, she descended the basement stairs. The electric furnace had vanished. So had the electric hot-water tank. So had the water pipes and the wiring.

Well anyway, her teakettle was full.

She was trembling now, partly from fright, but mostly from the cold. Returning to the kitchen, she built a fire in the wood stove and when it was going good she went into the living room and built another one in the fireplace. As warmth rose around her, some of her confidence returned. Remembering that there was snow on the ground, she found a pan in the kitchen and stepped out onto the back porch. Instantly, the candlelight shrank into a tiny sphere of wan light and she found that she couldn't see beyond a radius of two feet. The cold was unbearable, the blackness terrifying. She had a sudden, horrible conviction that the house no longer rested on solid earth and that if she were to step down from the porch, she would step into nothingness. Shuddering, she went back into the kitchen and closed the door.

The cordwood, she thought numbly. *If I can't get to the garage, how am I going to keep my fires going?*

There could be only one answer, and presently it came to her: *By burning the furniture.*

Thus far, she had not reacted to the situation the way a normal person would have reacted. Living alone for so long, she had failed to consider the possibility that the catastrophe that had overtaken her might have overtaken others as well, that it might, in fact, have overtaken the entire world. When the thought finally occurred to her, she hurried back into the living

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room, hungry for the first time in years for the sound of a human voice. However, her hunger was not appeased. There wasn't even an outline in the dust on the Sheraton sofa table to show where the phone had been.

She stood very still and clenched her hands into fists. "I won't scream," she said. "I won't."

Maybe somewhere in the house there was a transistor radio which she might have overlooked and which might still have enough power in its batteries to enable her to pick up a nearby station. It was a bright and shining hope while it lasted, but it didn't last long. She knew without even having to think that if there had been such a radio, it no longer existed any more than the phone did, any more than anything else that was endemic to the house and in the least incongruous with the Nelson-and Nora period. Besides, even if one did exist and even if its batteries still had power in them, what good would it be to her? Radio waves couldn't penetrate where light waves couldn't.

PENETRATE? Penetrate what? She frowned, trying to think. Did she understand unconsciously what had happened and was her unconscious mind reluctant to release the facts because they were too unpleasant? She closed her eyes. Maybe she could visualize the situation symbolically.

At first, she "saw" nothing. Then, gradually, a river took form. It was a wide river, flowing evenly between indeterminate banks, and in the middle of it there was a large rock. The part of the rock that rose above the surface was damp, indicating that the river had recently washed over it, and then leveled off. Elizabeth waited for more details to manifest themselves, but the image remained the way it was. At length she opened her eyes, no wiser than she had been before.

The fire was dying down, and she added more wood. She remembered that she hadn't had breakfast yet, and went into the kitchen and made a small pot of coffee. Raising one of the grids of the ancient wood stove, she toasted a slice of bread over the flames. She had enough food on hand to keep her going for a week —two, if she rationed it—and there were a couple of dozen quarts of fruit juice with which she could eke out her water supply. Of course she couldn't make coffee with fruit juice, but it wouldn't hurt her to go without coffee. "Why am I thinking like this?" she asked herself suddenly. "I act as though it really matters whether I live or die."

That afternoon, she found an

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ancient hatchet in the basement, brought it upstairs, and began breaking up enough furniture to see her through the night. As always, she saved the old at the expense of the new, and when she decided to supplement her fuel supply with books, the ones she brought in from the library were, like the furniture, directly related to the Nelson-and-Nora period. She hesitated over Emily Dickinson's *Further Poems,* but ultimately decided that it, too, must go, and piled it with the other doomed volumes.

She looked at the wing-back chair and the footstool. She would never burn them. Nor would she ever burn the bed in her room. The three pieces, along with the handless clock on the mantel and the wood stove in the kitchen, were the oldest items in the house. They *were* the house, in a way . . .

The books and the broken-up furniture stacked neatly beside the fireplace, Elizabeth fixed herself a frugal dinner. Afterward, she settled down before the fire with *Sonnets by E.B.B.* She spent the "night" in the wing-back chair, augmenting the heat from the fire, to which she periodically added books and wood, with a yellow lap robe. The cold neither intensified nor lessened. There was no wind, or if there was, she could not hear it; no sound at all save for the crackling of the flames. When she thought it was morning, she went out into the kitchen and fixed breakfast. During the next three "waking periods", as she came to call them, she broke up the rest of the Nelson-and-Nora furniture and burned it along with the Nelson-and-Nora books. It was with a feeling of vast regret that she cast the last volume into the flames. She felt as though she was destroying an entire age, a whole way of life; and the destruction was made all the more poignant by the fact that the last volume was Emily Dickinson's *The Single Hound.*

SHE watched the cover curl, saw the pages blacken. *Words, words,* she thought. *Your life, like mine, Emily, was words, words, words—words written in our lonely rooms, in secret and in silence and in pain, while without our windows birds sang, and lovers walked beneath the trees. Oh Matt, Matt, words are not enough to fill a person's life; as sustenance, they feed the soul, but starve the heart; and the patterns that we form with them are patterns, and nothing more. Pointless patterns falling like the leaves of life upon the dusty lap of death.*

The pages crinkled, turned to ashes; the cover crumbled away. The flames died down, and the room darkened . . . then grew

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abruptly bright with gaslight as the House of Dickenson shuddered. A Victorian side table with a marble top materialized along an empty wall. On it stood a Gothic wax light. In a poignant corner, a familiar harpsichord appeared. Gaily-patterned hooked rugs came into being on the barren floor. A fantastic chandelier appeared hanging from the suddenly immaculate ceiling, and walls and woodwork took on a brighter hue. A Victorian rosewood sofa sprang into existence where only dust and desuetude had been, and on it sat a young woman in a gay-nineties dress, crocheting in the radiance of a Pickle-jar lamp. Tantalizing aromas emanated from the kitchen, and somewhere in the house a music box was playing Brahm's *Lullaby*.

The moment was as transient as the first moment had been. In a sense, it was a picture glimpsed while riffling through the pages of a book. Now, the pages had come together, and the room was as it had been before, shadow-filled, pale with the radiance of fainting flames, inhabited only by an old woman sitting in a wing-back chair—an old woman whose resurrected spectacles did little for her fading vision, but who nevertheless had peered back through the pages of time and seen her own great-grandmother.

HALF dreaming, half awake, Elizabeth became aware of the awesome cold that had crept into the room. It was time to break up the rest of the furniture; time to burn the rest of the books.

She broke up all of the remaining pieces, all except the wing-back chair, the footstool, and her bed, and piled the remaining books by the fireplace, exempting only *Sonnets by E.B.B.* She wound the clock on the mantel in order that she might hear its rhythmic voice. "Tick-tock, tick-tock," it said, and chimed the hour of nothing.

The third and final shudder came two "waking-periods" later while the fire was burning bright and nothing remained to be consumed but the remnants of a Chippendale highboy. This time, there was no sudden brightness, only a gradual paling of the shadows as twilight tiptoed into the room. Going to the front door, Elizabeth opened it and looked out.

Night was falling swiftly. However, there was still enough light to see by. Upon the ground, snow lay; but it wasn't the same snow that had lain there before. Nor was the ground quite the same. The trees, too, had changed, and the shrubbery had disappeared. As for the street, it was a street no more, but a country road. Across it rose a stand

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of basswoods; some distance down it the buildings of a small village showed. Elizabeth heard the sound of sleighbells. She knew who she was then, who she had been all along. *Before I was born, I died, she thought. Before I knew the light of day, I breathed the breath of night. My sun had already set before I even saw it. And it was I and I alone who instigated this travesty of time.*

She stepped back into the House of Death and closed the door behind her. She listened in the silence, and presently she heard their wings. She was glad that they had come.

WHAT is a generation-house if it is not the sum of the generations that have lived in it, and what is that sum if it is not the sum of the possessions those generations have left behind? Let us take the quantity "8" and assume that it has been arrived at by the following process:

$2+2=4; 4+2=6; 6+2=8$

In the case of the House of Dickenson, there had been the time of Theodore, the time of Nelson, the time of Byron, and before those times there had been the time of the old woman in the wing-back chair. Let the time of the old woman equal 2, the time of Theodore equal 4, the time of Nelson equal 6, and the time of Byron equal 8. Now, the sum of a tree is the number of its rings, and by those rings, its years can be computed. It follows logically that if those rings could be removed one by one, the tree would grow progressively younger. In the case of a tree, this is manifestly impossible; but a generation-house is not a tree. The "rings" of a generation-house are the marks left by the people who have lived in it—the chairs and the sofas and the clocks and the books which those people left behind. Such "rings" as these *can* be removed, not entirely perhaps, but to an extent where the "ring" loses its identity and ceases to be; and if the house is ideally constituted, the forces of time themselves can be fooled. Now, let us reverse the process used to obtain 8:

$8-2=6; 6-2=4; 4-2=2$

Consider: What binds a composite object such as a generation-house to present? Is it not the presence in that house of objects belonging to the present? Is it not the presence of people in that house who *live* in the present? When a house is abandoned and allowed to fall into desuetude, it eventually acquires the reputation of being haunted, does it not? And because of this do we not consider it as being detrimental to our neighborhood and start taking the necessary steps to get rid of it? Thus do we cooperate with the forces of time, for the forces of time do not like

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abandoned houses either. Such houses are too easy to forget, and they are haunted in order that our attention will be drawn to them. Moreover, they are haunted, not by apparitions out of the past, but by apparitions out of the future; by the supernatural minions of time.

There are cases, however, when a house loses its tie-in with the present without being abandoned, and this is the kind of house that the forces of time invariably forget. Once forgotten, the house slips back into a more appropriate moment, conforms completely to that moment, and remains in abeyance till that moment passes; then the time-paradox factor goes into action and the house is automatically relegated to a timeless limbo where, in ordinary cases, it remains forever, all memory of it wiped from the minds of men. But the House of Dickenson did not constitute an ordinary case: owing to the individual character of its "rings" and to the precision with which they were removed, it slipped back into the past, not once, but three times, and on the third occasion it outraged the laws of cause and effect by precluding its own beginning. At this point, the forces of time awoke to the fact that a cycle had been set in motion underneath their very proboscides, and they dispatched their minions to eliminate it. The trick was to make 2=8, thereby forcing the law of probabilities to cause Theodore to build the house, and to cause the original contents of the house to be acquired at a later date. The key factor was an old woman sleeping in a wing-back chair.

* * *

OPENING her eyes, old Elizabeth Dickenson glimpsed lavender flutterings in the firelit room. "Come," she said impatiently. "Do what you have to do, and have done with it. Why do you keep an old woman waiting?"

Silence, then the dismal *flap-flap* of leathery wings. Elizabeth dozed again. Beside her, the flames crackled briskly as they consumed the last of the Chippendale highboy. Something cold and silken touched her cheek, but she neither stirred, nor opened her eyes. "Dress me in my burial gown if you must," she murmured. "Hang the grave damps round my head. But get on with your loathesome business."

The flapping crescendoed. There was a soporific quality about it. "I'm sorry, Matt," she whispered. "Unknowingly I held your life in my hands. Unknowingly I let you die." She sank down deeper into the chair. It was warm and restful there. *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the obbly-gobblies my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray*

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the obbly-gobblies my soul to take—

There was a knocking at the door.

The clatter of brass striking upon brass.

Young Elizabeth Dickenson opened her eyes.

A silvery web encased both her and the wing-back chair she sat in. She brushed the web away, and it was like wiping film from her eyes. The clock on the mantel said 4:19.

Matt, she thought. Matt, come to apologize. Part of her sprang to her feet, ran into the hall, and tried desperately to turn the knob that controlled the lock. But she was not strong enough. *Help me, help me!* she called to the rest of herself. *In a moment he'll be gone, and it'll be too late!*

Elizabeth did not move.

Suddenly a vista of long and empty years opened in her mind; long and empty years leading down, down, back, back, into darkness, into cold. She saw an old woman sitting by a fire. She saw two winged and hideous shapes.

Still, she did not move.

The image of the old woman faded from her mind, and the image of a man lying crushed beneath a ponderous machine took its place. "Matt, no!"

She was on her feet then, and running into the hall. She tore wildly at the knob, threw open the door. He was standing there in the late-afternoon sunlight, eyes hungry for the sight of her. In a moment, she was in his arms—

The face of all the world is changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul . . .

THE END

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the SUDDEN AFTERNOON

By J. G. BALLARD

Illustrator FINLAY

He had never been in India!

Why, then, did he remember his brown-skinned father rowing him across the burning Ganges?

WHAT surprised Elliott was the suddenness of the attack. Judith and the children had done down to the coast for the weekend to catch the last of the summer, leaving him alone in the house, and the three days had been a pleasant reverie of silent rooms, meals taken at random hours, and a little mild carpentry in the work-shop. He spent Sunday morning reading all the reviews in the newspapers, carefully adding half a dozen titles to the list of books which he knew he would never

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manage to buy, let alone read. These wistful exercises, like the elaborately prepared martini before lunch, were part of the established ritual of his brief bachelor moments. He decided to take a brisk walk across Hampstead Heath after lunch, returning in time to tidy everything away before Judith arrived that evening.

Instead, a sharp attack of what first appeared to be influenza struck him just before one o'clock. A throbbing headache and a soaring temperature sent him fumbling to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, only to find that Judith had taken the aspirin with her. Sitting on the edge of the bath, forehead in his hands, he nursed the spasm, which seemed to contract the muscles of some inner scalp, compressing his brain like fruit-pulp in a linen bag.

"Judith!" he shouted to the empty house. "Damn!"

The pain mounted, an intense prickling that drove silver needles through his skull. Helpless for a moment, he propelled himself into the bedroom and climbed fully dressed into the bed, shielding his eyes from the weak sunlight which crossed the Heath.

After a few minutes the attack subsided slightly, leaving him with a nagging migraine and a sense of utter inertia. For the next hour he stared at the reflection of himself in the dressing table mirror, lying like a trussed steer across the bed. Through the window he watched a small boy playing under the oaks by the edge of the park, patiently trying to catch the spiralling leaves. Twenty yards away a nondescript little man with a dark complexion sat alone on a bench, staring through the trees.

IN some way this scene soothed Elliott, and the headache finally dissipated, as if charmed away by the swaying boughs and the leaping figure of the boy.

"Strange . . ." he murmured to himself, still puzzled by the ferocity of the attack. Judith, however, would be skeptical; she had always accused him of being a hypochondriac. It was a pity she hadn't been there, instead of lying about on the beach at Worthing, but at least the children had been spared the spectacle of their father yelping with agony.

Reluctant to get out of bed and precipitate another attack—perhaps it was due to some virulent but short-lived virus?—Elliott lay back, the scent of his wife's skin on the pillow reminding him of his own childhood and his mother's perfumed hair. He had been brought up in India, and remembered being rowed across a river by his father, the great placid back of the

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Ganges turning crimson in the late afternoon light. The burnt-earth colors of the Calcutta waterfront were still vivid after an interval of thirty years.

Smiling pleasantly over this memory, and at the image of his father rowing with a rhythmic lulling motion, Elliott gazed upwards at the ceiling, only distracted by the distant hoot of a car horn.

Then he sat up abruptly, staring sharply at the room around him.

"Calcutta? What the hell—?"

The memory had been completely false! He had never been to India in his life, or anywhere near the Far East. He had been born in London, and lived there all his life apart from a two-year post-graduate visit to the United States. As for his father, who had been captured by the Germans while fighting with the Eighth Army in North Africa and spent most of the war as a P.O.W., Elliott had seen almost nothing of him until his adolescence.

Yet the memory of being rowed across the Ganges had been extraordinarily strong. Trying to shake off the last residue of the headache, Elliott swung his feet on to the floor. The throbbing had returned slightly, but in a curious way receded as he let the image of the Calcutta waterfront fill his mind. Whatever its source, the landscape was certainly Indian, and he could see the Ganges steps, a clutter of sailing dhows and even a few meagre funeral pyres smoking on the embankment.

But what most surprised him were the emotional associations of this false memory of being rowed by his father, the sense of reassurance that came with each rhythmic motion of the dark figure, whose face was hidden by the shadows of the setting sun.

WONDERING where he had collected this powerful visual impression which had somehow translated itself into a memory with unique personal undertones, Elliott left the bedroom and made his way down to the kitchen. It was now half past two, almost too late for lunch, and he stared without interest at the rows of eggs and milk bottles in the refrigerator. After lunch, he decided, he would settle down on the sofa in the lounge and read or watch television.

At the thought of the latter Elliott realized that the false memory of the Ganges was almost certainly a forgotten fragment of a film travelogue, probably one he had seen as a child. The whole sequence of the memory, with its posed shot of the boat cutting through the crimson water and the long traverse

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of the waterfront, were typical of the style of the travelogues made in the nineteen-forties, and he could almost see the credit titles coming up with a roll of drums.

Reassured by this, and assuming that the headache had somehow jolted loose this visual memory—the slightly blurred wartime cinema screens had often strained his eyes—Elliott began to prepare his lunch. He ignored the food Judith had left for him and hunted among the spices and pickle jars in the pantry, where he found some rice and a packet of curry powder. Judith had never mastered the intricacies of making a real curry, and Elliott's own occasional attempts had merely elicited amused smiles. Today, however, with ample time on his hands and no interference, he would succeed.

Unhurriedly Elliott began to prepare the dish, and the kitchen soon filled with steam and the savory odors of curry powder and chutney. Outside the thin sunlight gave way to darker clouds and the first afternoon rain. The small boy had gone, but the solitary figure under the oaks still sat on the bench, jacket collar turned up around his neck.

Delighted by the simmering brew, Elliott relaxed on his stool, and thought about his medical practice. Normally he would have been obliged to hold an evening surgery, but his locum had arranged to take over for him, much to his relief, as one of the patients had been particularly difficult—a complete neurotic, a hazard faced by every doctor, she had even threatened to report him to the general medical council for misconduct, though the allegations were so grotesque the disciplinary committee would not consider them seriously for a moment.

THE curry had been strong, and a sharp pain under the sternum marked the beginning of a bout of indigestion. Cursing his bad luck, Elliott poured a glass of milk, sorry to lose the flavor of the curry.

"You're in bad shape, old sport," he said to himself with ironic humor. "You ought to see a doctor."

With a sudden snap of his fingers he stood up. He had experienced his second false memory! The whole reverie about his medical practice, the locum and the woman patient were absolute fictions, unrelated to anything in his life. Professionally he was a research chemist, employed in the biochemistry department of one of the London cancer institutes, but his contacts with physicians and surgeons were virtually nil.

And yet the impression of hav-

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ing a medical practice, patients and all the other involvements of a busy doctor was remarkably strong and persistent—indeed, far more than a memory but a coherent area of awareness as valid as the image of the biochemistry laboratory.

With a growing sense of unease, Elliott sipped weakly at the tumbler of milk, wondering why these sourceless images, like fragments from the intelligence of some other individual, were impinging themselves on his mind. He went into the lounge and sat down with his back to the window, examining himself with as much professional detachment as he could muster. Behind him, under the trees in the park, the man on the bench sat silently in the rain, eyed at a safe distance by a wandering mongrel.

After a pause to collect himself, Elliott deliberately began to explore this second false memory. Immediately he noticed that the dyspepsia subsided, as if assuming the persona of the fragmented images relieved their pressure upon his mind. Concentrating, he could see a high window above a broad mahogany desk, a padded leather couch, shelves of books and framed certificates on the walls, unmistakeably a doctor's consulting rooms. Leaving the room, he passed down a broad flight of carpeted stairs into a marble-floored hall. A desk stood in an alcove on the left, and a pretty red-haired receptionist looked up and smiled to him across her typewriter. Then he was outside in the street, obviously in a well-to-do quarter of the city, where Rolls-Royces and Bentleys almost outnumbered the other cars. Two hundred yards away double-decker buses crossed a familiar intersection.

"Harley Street!" Elliott snapped. As he sat up and looked around at the familiar furniture in the lounge and the drenched oaks in the park, with an effort re-establishing their reality in his mind, he had a last glimpse of the front elevation of the consulting chambers, a blurred name-plate on the cream-painted columns. Over the portico were the gilt italic numerals: *259*.

"Two fifty-nine Harley Street? Now who the devil works there?" Elliott stood up and went over to the window, staring out across the Heath, then paced into the kitchen and savored the residue of the curry aroma. Again a spasm of indigestion gripped his stomach, and he immediately focussed on the image of the unknown doctor's consulting rooms. As the pain faded he had a further impression of a small middle-aged woman in a hospital ward, her left arm in a cast, and then a picture of the staff and

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consultants' entrance to the Middlesex Hospital, as vivid as a photograph.

PICKING up the newspaper, Elliott returned to the lounge, settling himself with difficulty. The absolute clarity of the memories convinced him that they were not confused images taken from cine-films or elaborated by his imagination. The more he explored them the more they fixed their own reality, refusing to fade or vanish. In addition, the emotional content was too strong. The associations of the childhood river scene were reassuring, but the atmosphere in the consulting rooms had been fraught with hesitation and anxiety, as if their original possessor was in the grip of a nightmare.

The headache still tugged at his temples, and Elliott went over to the cocktail cabinet and poured himself a large whisky and soda. Had he in some incredible way simultaneously become the receiver of the dismembodied memories of a small Indian boy in Calcutta and a Harley Street consultant?

Glancing at the front news page, his eye caught:

INDIAN DOCTOR SOUGHT
Wife's Mystery Death
Police are continuing their search for the missing Harley Street psychiatrist, Dr. Krishnamurti Singh. Scotland Yard believes he may be able to assist them in their inquiries into the death of his wife, Mrs. Ramadya Singh . . .

With a surge of relief, Elliott slapped the newspaper and tossed it across the room. So this explained the two imaginary memories! Earlier that morning, before the influenza attack, he had read the news item without realizing it, then during the light fever had dramatized the details. The virulent virus—a rare short-lived strain he had picked up at the laboratory—presumably acted like the hallucinogenic drugs, creating an inner image of almost photographic authenticity. Even the curry had been part of the system of fantasy.

Elliott wandered ruminatively around the lounge, listening to the rain sweep like hail across the windows. Within a few moments he knew that more of these hallucinatory memories lay below the surface of his mind, all revolving around the identity of the missing Indian doctor.

Unable to dispel them, he deliberately let himself drift off into a reverie. Perhaps the association of the funereal rain and the tiresome pain below his sternum was responsible for the

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gathering sense of foreboding in his mind. Formless ideas rose towards consciousness, and he stirred uneasily in his chair. Without realizing it, he found himself thinking of his wife's death, an event shrouded in pain and a peculiar dream-like violence. For a moment he was almost inside his wife's dying mind, at the bottom of an immense drowned lake, separated from the distant pinpoint of sky by enormous volumes of water that pressed upon his chest. . . .

IN a flood of sweat, Elliott awoke from this nightmare, the whole tragic vision of his wife's death before his eyes. Judith was alive, of course, staying with her married sister at the beach-house near Worthing, but the vision of her drowning had come through with the force and urgency of a telepathic signal.

"Judith!"

Rousing himself, Elliott hurried to the telephone in the hall. Something about its psychological dimensions convinced him that he had not imagined the death scene.

The sea!

He snatched up the phone, dialing for the operator. At that very moment Judith might well be swimming alone while her sister prepared tea with the children, in sight of the beach but unaware she was in danger. . . .

"Operator, this is urgent," Elliott began. "I must talk to my wife, I think she's in some sort of danger. Can you get me Calcutta 30331."

The operator hesitated. "Calcutta? I'm sorry, caller, I'll transfer you to Overseas—"

"What? I don't want—" Elliott stopped. "What number did I ask for?"

"Calcutta 30331. I'll have you transfered."

"Wait!" Elliott steadied himself against the window. The rain beat across the glazed panes. "My mistake. I meant Worthing 303—"

"Are you there, caller? Worthing Three Zero Three—" Her voice waited.

Wearily Elliott lowered the telephone. "I'll look it up," he said thickly. "That wasn't the number."

He turned the pages of the memo pad, realizing that both he and Judith had known the number for years and never bothered to record it.

"Are you there, caller?" The operator's voice was sharper.

A few moments later, when he was connected to Directory Inquiries, Elliott realized that he had also forgotten his sister-in-law's name and address.

CALCUTTA 30331." Elliott repeated the number as he poured himself a drink from the

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whisky decanter. Pulling himself together, he recognized that the notion of a telepathic message was fatuous. Judith would be perfectly safe, on her way back to London with the children, and he had misinterpreted the vision of the dying woman. The telephone number, however, remained. The enigmatic sequence flowed off his tongue with the unconscious familiarity of long usage. A score of similar memories waited to be summoned into reality, as if a fugitive mind had taken up residence in his brain.

He picked the newspaper off the floor.

> . . . Dr. Krishnamurti Singh. Scotland Yard believe he may be able to assist them in their inquiries . . .

'Assist them in their inquiries' —a typical Fleet Street euphemism, part of the elaborate code build up between the newspapers and their readers. A French paper, not handicapped by the English libel laws, would be shouting 'Bluebeard! Assassin!'

> Detectives are at the bedside of Mrs. Ethel Burgess, the charwoman employed by Dr. and Mrs. Singh, who was yesterday found unconscious at the foot of the stairs. . . .

Mrs. Burgess! Instantly an image of the small elderly woman, with a face like a wizened apple, came before his eyes. She was lying in the hospital bed at the Middlesex, watching him with frightened reproachful glances—

The tumbler, half-filled with whisky, smashed itself on the fireplace tiles. Elliott stared at the fragments of wet glass around his feet, then set down in the center of the sofa with his head in his hands, trying to hold back the flood of memories. Helplessly he found himself thinking of the medical school at Calcutta. The half-familiar faces of fellow students passed in a blur. He remembered his passionate interest in developing a scientific approach to the obscurer branches of yoga and the Hindu parapsychologies, the student society he formed and its experiments in thought and body transference, brought to an end by the death of one of the students and the subsequent scandal. . . .

For a moment Elliott marvelled at the coherence and convincing detail of the memories. Numbly he reminded himself that in fact he had been a chemistry student at—

Where?

With a start he realized that he had forgotten. Quickly he searched his mind, and found he could remember almost nothing

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of his distant past, where he was born, his parents and childhood. Instead he saw once again, this time with luminous clarity, the rowing-boat on the crimson Ganges and its dark oarsman watching him with his ambiguous smile. Then he saw another picture, of himself as a small boy, writing in a huge ledger in which all the pencilled entries had been laboriously rubbed out, sitting at a desk in a room with a low ceiling of bamboo rods over his father's warehouse by the market—

"Nonsense!" Flinging the memory from him, with all its tender associations, Elliott stood up restlessly, his heart racing with a sudden fever. His forehead burned with heat, his mind inventing strings of fantasies around the Dr. Singh wanted by the police. He felt his pulse, then leaned into the mirror over the mantelpiece and examined his eyes, checking his pupil reflexes with expert fingers for any symptoms of concussion.

Swallowing with a dry tongue, he stared down at the physician's hands which had examined him, then decided to call his own doctor. A sedative, an hour's sleep, and he would recover.

In the falling evening light he could barely see the numerals. "Hello, hello!" he shouted. "Is anyone there?"

"Yes, Dr. Singh," a woman replied. "Is that you?"

Frightened, Elliott cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. He had dialled the number fom memory, but from an other memory than his own. But not only had the receptionist recognized his voice—Elliott had recognized her's, and knew her name.

Experimentally he lifted the receiver, and said the name in his mind. "Miss Tremayne—?"

"Dr. Singh? Are you—"

With an effort Elliott made his voice more gutteral. "I'm sorry, I have the wrong number. What is your number?"

The girl hesitated. When she spoke the modulation and rhythm of her voice were again instantly familiar. "This is Harley Street 30331," she said cautiously. "Dr. Singh, the police have—"

Elliott lowered the telephone into its cradle. Wearily he sat down on the carpet in the darkness, looking up at the black rectangle of the front door. Again the headache began to drum at his temples, as he tried to ignore the memories crowding into his mind. Above him the staircase led to another world.

HALF an hour later, he pulled himself to his feet. Searching for his bed, and fearing the light, he stumbled into a room and lay down. With a start he clambered upright, and found that he was lying on the table in the dining room.

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He had forgotten his way around the house, and the topography of another home, apparently a single-story apartment, had superimposed itself upon his mind. In the strange upstairs floor he found an untidy nursery full of children's toys and clothes, an unremembered freize of childish drawings which showed tranquil skies over church steeples. When he closed the door the scene vanished like a forgotten tableau.

In the bedroom next door a portrait photograph stood on the dressing table, showing the face of a pleasant blond-haired woman he had never seen. He gazed down at the bed in the darkness, the wardrobes and mirrors around him like the furniture of a dream.

"Ramadya, Ramadya," he murmured, on his lips the name of the dying woman.

The telephone rang. Standing in the darkness at the top of the stairs, he listened to its sounds shrilling through the silent house. He walked down to it with leaden feet.

"Yes?" he said tersely.

"Hello, darling," a woman's bright voice answered. In the background trains shunted and whistled. "Hello? Is that Hampstead—"

"This is Harley Street 30331," he said quickly. "You have the wrong number."

"Oh, dear, I am sorry, I thought—"

Cutting off this voice, which for a fleeting moment had drawn together the fragmented persona clinging to the back of his mind, he stood at the window by the front door. Through the narrow barred pane he could see that the rain had almost ended, and a light mist hung among the trees. The bedraggled figure on the bench still maintained his vigil, his face hidden in the darkness. Now and then his drenched form would glimmer in the passing lights.

For some reason a sense of extreme urgency had overtaken Elliott. He knew that there were a series of tasks to be performed, records to be made before important evidence vanished, reliable witnesses to be contacted. A hundred ignored images passed through his mind as he searched for a pair of shoes and a jacket in the cupboard upstairs, scenes of his medical practice, a woman patient being tested by an electroencephalogram, the radiator of a Bentley car and its automobile club badges. There were glimpses of the streets near Harley Street, the residue of countless journeys to and from the consulting rooms, the entrance to the Overseas Club, a noisy seminar at one of the scientific institutes where someone was shouting at him theatrically.

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Then, unpleasantly, there were feelings of remorse for his wife's death, counterbalanced by the growing inner conviction that this, paradoxically, was the only way to save her, to force her to a new life. In a strange yet familiar voice he heard himself saying: 'the soul, like any soft-skinned creature, clings to whatever shell it can find. Only by cracking that shell can one force it to move to a new . . .'

ATTACKS of vertigo came over him in waves as he descended the staircase. There was someone he must find, one man whose help might save him. He picked up the telephone and dialled, swaying giddily from side to side.

A clipped voice like polished ivory answered. "Professor Ramachandran speaking."

"Professor—"

"Hello? Who is that, please?"

He cleared his throat, coughing noisily into the mouthpiece. "Professor, understand me! It was the tumor, inoperable, it was the only way to save her—metempsychosis of the somatic function as well as the psychic. . . ." He had launched into a semi-coherent tirade, the words coming out in clotted shreds. "Ramadya has gone over now, she is the other woman . . . neither she nor any others will ever know. . . . Professor, will you tell her one day, and myself . . . a single word—"

"Dr. Singh!" The voice at the other end was a shout. "I can no longer help you! You must take the consequences of your folly! I warned you repeatedly about the danger of your experiments—"

The telephone squeaked on the floor where he dropped it. Outside the headlamps of police cars flashed by, their blue roof lights revolving like spectral beacons. As he unlatched the door and stepped out into the cold night air he had a last obsessive thought, of a fair-haired, middle-aged man with glasses who was a chemist at a cancer institute, a man with a remarkably receptive mind, its open bowl spread before him like a huge dish antenna. This man alone could help him. His name was—Elliott.

AS he sat on the bench he saw the lights approaching him through the trees, like glowing aureoles in the darkness. The rain had ended and a light mist dissipated under the branches, but after the warmth indoors it was colder than he expected, and within only a few minutes in the park he began to shiver. Walking between the trees, he saw the line of police cars parked along the perimeter road two hundred yards away. Whichever way he moved, the lights seemed to draw

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nearer, although never coming directly towards him.

He turned, deciding to return to the house, and to his surprise saw a slim fair-haired man cross the road from the park and climb the steps to the front door. Startled, he watched this intruder disappear through the open door and close it behind him.

Then two policemen stepped from the mist on his right, their torches dazzling his eyes. He broke into a run, but a third huge figure materialized from behind a trunk and blocked his path.

"That's enough then," a gruff voice told him as he wrestled helplessly. "Let's try to take it quietly."

Lamps circled the darkness. More police ran over through the trees. An inspector with silver shoulder badges stepped up and peered into his face as a constable raised a torch.

"Dr. Singh?"

For a moment he listened to the sounds of the name, which had pursued him all day, hang fleetingly on the damp air. Most of his mind seemed willing to accept the identification, but a small part, now dissolving to a minute speck, like the faint stars veiled by the mist, refused to agree, knowing that whoever he was now, he had once not been Dr. Singh.

"No!" He shook his head, and with a galvanic effort managed to wrench loose one arm. He was seized at the shoulder and raised his free arm to shield himself from the lights and the pressing faces.

His glasses had fallen off and been trampled underfoot, but he could see more clearly without them. He looked at his hand. Even in the pale light the darker pigmentation was plain. His fingers were small and neat, an unfamiliar scar marking one of the knuckles.

Then he felt the small goatee beard on his chin.

Inside his mind the last island of resistance slid away into the dark unremembered past.

"Dr. Krishnamurti Singh," the inspector stated.

AMONG the suitcases in the doorway Judith Elliott watched the police cars drive away towards Hampstead village. Upstairs the two children romped about in the nursery.

"How horrid! I'm glad the children didn't see him arrested. He was struggling like an animal."

Elliott paid off the taxi-driver and then closed the door. "Who was it, by the way? No one we know, I hope?"

Judith glanced around the hall, and noticed the telephone receiver on the floor. She bent down and replaced it. "The taxi-driver said it was some Harley Street

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psychiatrist. An Indian doctor. Apparently he strangled his wife in the bath. The strange thing is she was already dying of a brain tumor."

Elliott grimaced. "Gruesome. Perhaps he was trying to save her pain."

"By strangling her fully conscious? A typical masculine notion, darling."

Elliott laughed as they strolled into the lounge. "Well, my dear, did you have a good time? How was Molly?"

"She was fine. We had a great time together. Missed you, of course. I felt a bit off-color yesterday, got knocked over by a big wave and swallowed a lot of water." She hesitated, looking through the window at the park. "You know, it's rather funny, but twenty minutes ago I tried to ring you from the station and got a Harley Street number by mistake. I spoke to an Indian. He sounded rather like a doctor."

Elliott grinned. "Probably the same man."

"That's what I thought. But he couldn't have got from Harley Street to Hampstead so quickly, could he? The driver said the police have been looking for him here all afternoon."

"Maybe they've got the wrong man. Unless there are two Dr. Singh's." Elliott snapped his fingers. "That's odd, where did I get the name? Must have read about him in the papers."

Judith nodded, coming over to him. "It was in this morning's." She took off her hat and placed it on the mantelpiece. "Indians are strange people. I don't know why, but yesterday when I was getting over my wave I was thinking about an Indian girl I knew once. All I can remember is her name. Ramadya. I think she was drowned. She was very sweet and pretty."

"Like you." Elliott put his hands around her waist, but Judith pointed to the broken glass in the fireplace.

"I say, I can see I've been away." With a laugh she put her hands on his shoulders and squeezed him, then drew away in alarm.

"Darling, where did you get this peculiar suit? For heaven's sake, look!" She squeezed his jacket, and the water poured from her fingers as from a wet sponge. "You're soaked through! Where on earth have you been all day?"

THE END

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the Singing Sands

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

IN his book Pulpwood, *Editor Harold B. Hersey said,*

"H. Bedford-Jones is one of these miracle word-men, turning out stories with such fantastic speed and of such uniform excellence that his work is constantly in demand by those editors who can afford to pay his well-earned rates. H. Bedford-Jones thinks nothing of doing two novels simultaneously. *Once, when I visited him in his home outside Paris, I found him using two typewriters, one for a Chinese, the other for a Western tale. He alternated between the machines, turning out a few pages dealing with Oriental adventure and then going over to the typewriter on the opposite side of the room and rattling off another scene in a hair-on-the-chest cowboy story."*

Bedford-Jones was at once one of the most prolific and one of the most colorfully scholarly writers the pulps have ever known. During the Roaring Twenties and the Depressing Thirties, it is doubtful if there was a single quality fiction adventure magazine which failed to carry entertainment under his by-line with some degree of regularity.

A Canadian by birth (born April 29, 1887, Napanee, Ont.) Bedford-Jones whose full name was Henry James O'Brien Bedford-Jones, became a naturalized American citizen, launching himself on a writing career which began in 1908 and continued almost to the date of his death, May 6, 1949. During that time he had some 70 books published, his first a swashbuckling

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# of Prester John

Introduction by SAM MOSKOWITZ

Illustrator SCHELLING

historical Cross and Hammer *in 1912. He claimed to have made in the vicinity of a million dollars from writing alone during his career.*

Perhaps the height of his pulp popularity was achieved with his fascinating series Arms and Men *and* Ships and Men in BLUE BOOK *magazine, in which he traced in fictional form the development of various types of weapons and seacraft through the ages.*

A related series was Trumpets From Oblivion, *13 short stories in all, published in* BLUE BOOK *during 1938 and 1939 and employing the technical device of a machine that could bring back the image of past events as well as translate ancient tongues into English in order to track down the origin of many of the strange legends of mankind, among them those concerning werewolves, unicorns, mermaids, amazons thunderbirds and the like.*

Singing Sands of Prester John *was the fourth in the series and probed the myriad confused and questionable legends concerning that fabled character. Fantasy fans were brought dramatically in contact with Prester John in the two novels by Norvell W. Page in* Unknown *magazine:* Flame Winds (*June, 1939*) *and* Sons of the Bear God (*Nov., 1939*). *The publication dates of those two novels follow so closely upon the heels of* Singing Sands of Prester John *that a good case could be made for suggesting it might have influenced their writing.*

Prester John was said to have been the Christian king of an Asian domain somewhere close to China. He first came to the attention of the Western world when three letters allegedly signed by him were received, in

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the 12th century, by the three mightiest rulers of that era, including Pope Alexander III, whose letter and reply has been passed down. Stories concerning his feats and fate were carried back to Europe by many travelers, most notably Marco Polo. Legends associated his name with strange military weapons and a certain amount of sorcery. In this story, H. Bedford-Jones, offers his enthralling interpretations of the Prester John mystery.

"NORMAN FLETCHER," I stated, "has a theory that the race of men aren't fools; that the myths and fables of old have a basis of fact."

"Something to that!" Parker kindled. "Fletcher! Do you mean that Yankee scientist who's accomplished such wonders with ultrasonic waves? Why, he's one of the world's most famous men!"

"Well, he's got our local Inventors' Club about gaga," I said wryly. "He's been giving us weekly demonstrations of a sort of wrong-way television; he claims that it recaptures and brings back scenes and sounds of the past, on the principle that light and sound never die. He's promised some day to bring back Cæsar's dying voice, and so forth. Just now, he's been re-creating the origin of old myths. I don't know, none of us know, whether he's having fun with us, tricking us with some illusion, or really showing a marvelous instrument of the future."

In his own way, Parker is as famous as Norman Fletcher is in electrical wizardry. He has traveled everywhere, chiefly in Asia. Mention any obscure spot in the middle of the Gobi Desert and he's been there. It was Parker who brought back that wild story, later proved to be fact, about the grave of Genghis Khan.

As we discussed Norman Fletcher's remarkable feats, my friend's interest kindled. He scoffed at my skepticism; Fletcher, said he, was too famous a man to indulge in any childish illusion or trickery. Especially as Fletcher allowed us to give him, each week, a subject for the next week's demonstration. Rather shamefacedly, I admitted that tonight we were to witness a subject I myself had suggested.

"You see, I wanted to obviate any chance for trickery," I said. "A week wouldn't give him time to get a movie faked up—though we're fairly certain that what we see isn't a motion picture. We have some good technical brains in the Inventors' Club. I suggested the old explorers' yarn, reported by Marco Polo and even as far back as Herodotus, about desert sands that sing. In fact, I

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did more: I quoted a line from some old poem, and he took it for this week's subject—the Singing Sands of Prester John. Of course, there's no connection between singing sands and the mythical Prester John—"

PARKER had been looking at me with an amazed expression.

"But there is! My Lord, man, there is!" he broke in. "This singing sands—I've heard 'em, just as Marco Polo did! They're open to scientific explanation. Like the famous singing Memnon—when Lord Curzon was in Egypt, he investigated the statue of Memnon and proved just how it had happened to sing."

"But Prester John was in Abyssinia!" I exclaimed.

He shook his head.

"No; it goes farther back, as far as the Crusades. Prester John was in Asia. These yarns about him, and about the singing sands of the Lopnor desert, date back to the time when that desert was the garden of the world and the richest province in China. But deforestation, changing streams and lakes, ruined it and the desert moved in. Why, Sven Hedin found an entire city scooped bare by the sand, a whole forest! And next week it was covered from sight again. Even now, travelers there make fires from sand-buried poplar trees that died a thousand years ago! Look here, I'd give a good deal to attend your séance tonight!"

Easily arranged: I phoned Norman Fletcher; he had heard of Parker, and was delighted to include him in the invitation. So there we were.

* * *

Old Fletcher, white-haired, affable, perhaps a bit lonely, had come to cherish these weekly meetings. He loved to make each meeting the occasion of a bang-up dinner; and tonight was no exception. When at length we rose from the table and followed into his laboratory, where stood an open humidor of cigars, we knew we had dined well.

Norman Fletcher took his seat at his switchboard, the only piece of apparatus in sight. The entire house was of cut stone; we sat facing a bare granite wall. I felt a trifle guilty over bringing Parker, for if there were anything amiss with what we saw, he would know it; yet Norman Fletcher seemed unperturbed.

He switched the room lights low, and turned to us.

"While the tubes are warming up, my friends, let me say that to tune in tonight's subject has been extremely difficult; why, I cannot determine. Not until late this afternoon did the results become good."

Wallach, our technical genius

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of the screen, spoke up dryly.

"Then I presume you've not changed the sound effects that you've recovered from oblivion? The characters won't speak in English, but in some forgotten tongue?"

Norman Fletcher gave him a twinkling glance.

"They'll speak in English, Mr. Wallach; that's been arranged—the words have been fairly well synchronized. Indeed, it's highly necessary! You're about to witness a scene from Central Asia of a thousand years ago; the language recovered is today unintelligible. I suppose you gentlemen are aware that in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries Christianity, in the form of the Nestorian Church, had spread far over the Eastern world? From China south to Sumatra, it was so widespread that there were more Christians in Asia than in Europe. According to legend, they were ruled by a king named Prester John."

"Didn't the Pope send an embassy to him?" asked some one.

Fletcher nodded.

"More than once, but too late. In the Twelfth Century Pope Alexander III sent an envoy and a letter; the monk Sergius went —and was never heard from again. The Crusaders hoped that while they attacked the Holy Land from the west, Prester John would attack from the east, as their ally. Remember, it was a day of simple faith, of credulous beliefs, when men fought terribly, sang lustily and reached for the stars in childish confidence! What you're about to see and hear, is a trumpet from oblivion, a sweet-toned trumpet—it happened three years after the monk Sergius started east to find Prester John, in the year 1180. For two years he traveled; then he died and his letter was taken on by another—"

Norman Fletcher checked himself abruptly; there was a crackling sound from his unseen tubes, and the blank, solid stone wall before us showed a faint drifting light that gradually became stronger. Now, I had examined this wall with the greatest attention. It formed the exterior house wall, was unplastered, and was composed of large granite stones. Yet now, as previously, it dissolved before our eyes as the light increased!

Fletcher played with his switches. A queer, thin sound grew and grew, yet remained very faint; it was something like the sound of wind in a pine tree, but sharper, more definite, like distant singing on two notes only. The light grew stronger and the wall dissolved—we were looking through it now, as though through some window. I heard Parker, beside me, utter a low gasp.

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SAND was flying amid jagged, scattered rocks; a desert scene, the wind blowing hard, the sun shining bright and strong, and more and more definite came the uncertain song of the blowing sand—but always upon those two notes, until one fancied in it a distinct motive, a cadenced rise and fall, like that of a singing voice.

A horse dashed from behind the rocks, then another. Two riders, whipping, spurring hard, so muffled in strange garments that to see anything of them was impossible. One caught peals of laughter as the horses leaped away. They plunged through the sand, came upon a long, low shoulder of rock, and crossed it. The sound of singing ceased entirely, as the horses raced across sand and rock to a double line of huge green poplars.

Past the trees, in upon cultivated lands. More trees ahead. A river valley grew to the eye, and a road, trodden deep and wide—the great Silk Road, with a glimpse of lakes shimmering far southward, and high Himalayan peaks and glaciers across the sky. The Silk Road of China, one of the great arteries of the world, on which silk and woven stuffs and paper and printing were flowing into the western parts of the earth, as they had been flowing these thousand years and more.

A city grew in the river valley or rather gorge—a city walled and guarded. The great road passed on the uplands beside and behind it, where a second little city of caravanserais and shops arose; but the city itself lay within walls, and the two horses raced on to its gates, where armed guards halted them. The first rider showed a signet of jade and both were passed with respectful salutes.

NOW, threading the narrow streets to the palace, also walled and gated, the riders threw back their wraps. The first was a girl, beautiful, of Chinese cast. The second was a man, with short curling golden hair, blue eyes and white bronzed skin. At the palace gate they entered, unquestioned by the guards, and drew rein before separating.

"You have an hour," she said. "Then, remember, my father wants to hear more about the western lands. When the feast is finished and the lamps are low, come to the Pavilion of the Western Fairies; I'll be waiting."

"Listen, Lady San-kao!" he exclaimed, his brows knotting a little. His words were not fluent; he spoke slowly, carefully. "You've promised day after day to tell me what no one else will or can tell me; the way to the realm of Prester John, him whom you call Ung Khan! What's the mys-

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tery? What is the secret?"

She leaned over, her eyes laughing. "Tonight, T'ie Kia! I swear it!"

Then she was gone with a leap of her horse; but he, frowning, sought the quarters that had been assigned him, turned over his horse to the battered old half-Tartar servant who had come with him out of the west, and sought his own chamber.

There he removed his outer garments, took off the flexible mail-shirt that had given him his Chinese name of Iron Armor, and sank down to munch a huge peach from the salver of fruit the Khan had sent him. For he was an honored guest in this city of Taklamakhan, Great Palace of the Khan, at the edge of China; he had been here some weeks, awaiting some response from the Emperor of China as to whether he might be admitted to the country. And he might be more weeks or months ere the response came. The Khan loved to hear his tales of the west, of Byzantium and other lands; he was accounted a good liar and a right merry fellow.

But not a soul would, or could tell him anything about Ung Khan, or Prester John.

His servant came in and squatted respectfully. This old Tartar had been the servant and guide of Friar Sergius, when the monk lay dying in a town at the verge of the Indian mountains. Walter of Sicily, young and filled with the breath of adventure, had come upon them there, abandoned the traders with whom he traveled, and took up the glorious task of carrying on the dying monk's errand.

And now, a year later, he was T'ie Kia, or Iron Armor, waiting at the door of China, with the letter from the Pope in his baggage, and Prester John as far away as ever.

"Have you learned anything, Hung?" he asked.

The Tartar shook his head.

"Nothing more than we knew already, Lord. Somewhere in this land was the realm of Ung Khan, but his name is unknown today. I met an ancient man this morning, a Buddhist pilgrim bound for India. He said there had been such a ruler, but the Mongol tribes had stamped him out and his whole people with him, long ago."

Walter's keen, vigorous features were despondent; his wide-shouldered, powerful body drooped, and he spat out the peach-stone with a muttered oath.

"If I had not sworn on my honor to deliver this letter from the Pope, I'd quit now; but an oath to a dying monk—well, slow oaths are best kept! I'll find out something tonight, after I leave the Khan. The Lady San-kao

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knows, and promised to tell me later."

The old Tartar wrinkled up his face. He had traveled far to the west, had seen many men and women of all races; he eyed women with a warrior's disdain —an old warrior's.

"There is some talk of your friendship with that lady," he said sourly. "She is the Khan's sister. This is not China, where the position of great ladies is circumscribed; but all the same, I've heard talk. You'd better leave her alone."

Walter laughed, his eyes kindling. "Ah, what a girl she is! And you've taught me enough of the language so I can get on with her; but never fear, the Khan and I are friends. Look here! If Prester John is dead, if there's no Christian kingdom in these parts, then I'm free of my oath to Friar Sergius!"

The Tartar grunted, caring nothing about oaths as long as he got his pay regularly. Fired by this thought, Walter rose, took a walk to stretch his legs, left the palace and sauntered out into the city bazaars. Behind, at some distance, followed a palace official who was charged with his safety. Some of these Tartar, Mongol or Tungan tribesmen might be tempted by this white stranger's glittering gold chain to try rough jokes.

AND such a city! Even to one who had seen Byzantium and palaces of Ind, this place held a blaze of glamorous color. The golden stupas or domes of shrines and temples mingled with the tender apricot and peach orchards; soldiers thronged the streets, wild tribesmen, Chinese regulars in gayly lacquered armor; patches of mulberry trees along the turbulent little river at the bottom of the gorge, and the sheds of silkworkers, flanked the bazaars where all manner of tradesmen and merchants thronged.

Chariots and huge winter-shaggy camels, horsemen, fishermen from the lakes, red and yellow lamas from monasteries, jugglers, musicians—a wild thronging medley of life. Over all, and everywhere, lifted the *tinkle-tinkle* of camel-bells, coming from these patiently plodding beasts who threaded the great Silk Road from the Jade Gate in the east to western Samarkand.

Searching the bazaars, Walter chanced upon a curious red coral necklace, highly carved, and bought it as a gift for Lady San-kao. He paid with links hewed from his golden chain; a chain that was rapidly shortening, since funds were running low. Then back to the palace, in time to change for dinner.

A long and interminable meal,

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this, broken by jugglers and by dancing-girls; the hall with its enormous carven pillars and gay lanterns and fantastic costumes —Tibetans, monks, soldiers, diplomats, with the Khan himself at the head. A morose man, not old yet older than his sister, the Khan honored his guest from the western regions with the same passive air with which he would kill him if orders to do so came from China. He was a vassal of China, of the Kin dynasty which ruled in Peking, the fabulously wealthy and corrupt imperial line soon to be stamped out of existence by the Mongol hordes.

When the feast degenerated into a wild carouse, with the tiny cups of hot wine coming thick and fast, Walter quietly took his leave unobserved. He picked his way, alone, across the wide palace gardens. A spring moon hung in the sky, red and angry with the desert dust that blew afar; from the lower gardens came the turbulent sound of the river, whose waters were high but confined within the walls of the gorge, and the mill-wheels were running full blast. It was because of the water-power here that the city lay in the gorge itself.

Curious weather, he reflected; the river was full, the lakes were overflowing, yet there was no rain. These torrential waters came in hurtling masses from the snow-covered mountains above.

SOFT voices greeted him; the two slave-girls of Lady Sankao were watching, and led him to the little summer-house where she awaited him. A curious dim lantern of fish-skin lighted the soft pillows, the sweetmeat box the rustling silken garments—strange luxury for a girl who could ride and think and act like a soldier!

Girl? No; woman, alluring and lovely, touched with Oriental mystery and yet frank and openhearted as a child. She smiled as Walter sank down beside her, and reaching out, touched the strings of a queer long lute stretched across the floor, and sang, almost under her breath, a song of unknown words and barbaric rhythms. It struck him with an odd sense of familiarity.

"What song is that?" he demanded, as her voice ceased.

"You do not recognize it, Lord T'ie Kia? It is your own song, the song of your quest here, your long travels; it is a song which will never cease nor have an end; the song of death and its terror, and of life that has no end."

"I'm in no mood for riddles," he said, with a touch of irritation. "Death has no terror; we all die, and why fear it?"

"Ah, rough soldier! But who wants to die young?" her soft

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voice chided him. "Do you know what that song said? A queer, simple song of the camel-men:

The wind blows and the stars twinkle above the hill,
As they did when we, like you, rode this way;
But now we know all that you have yet to learn.

Walter frowned.

"More riddles, eh? There's nothing about me or my travels in that song!"

"You'll see, Lord T'ie Kia! Perhaps you'll understand it tomorrow, when I take you to the palace of Ung Khan. We'll ride there together, you and I, as we rode today."

"What?" He thrilled to the name. "You mean that Prester John is near here?"

She assented softly. "In two hours we can reach his palace."

"By the saints! Then why haven't I learned it before now? Why has everyone shrugged and denied knowledge of him or his realm? Why is his very name apparently unknown?"

She stirred, and spoke earnestly, her voice tender and melancholy as the voices of the wood doves in the peach orchards by the river.

"Here is the answer, Lord; to mention that name, to discuss it or the things concerning it, is bad luck, for it is accursed. You know where we were riding today, out beyond the long ridge of rock? That was once all lovely country and beautiful gardens, stretching over the horizon; now it is desert. Few of our people have ever heard the name of Ung Khan. We care nothing about the past, and know little of it; we live our own day, which will soon be gone, for the desert comes drifting slowly upon us and nothing can hinder it. That ridge of rocks holds it off, and the dikes and irrigation walls; but some day these will burst, and there will be no people to rebuild them, and the desert will be lord of all."

"Then," demanded Walter quickly, "is Prester John, whom you call Ung Khan, dead?"

"He and all his people are dead, yet they are not dead; they are accursed and can never die. They prey on the caravans. Men are lured from the road by voices that call to them; they follow, and die. Sometimes whole caravans perish, for camel-bells lure the beasts off the track. Only last month, Ung Khan himself and a party of his horsemen were seen, marching with drums and trumpets; they attacked a small caravan and it perished. One man was picked up, dying—and he told of it before he died."

"And you know where his palace lies?"

She smiled rather sadly.

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"Yes. I'll take you there tomorrow, even though it means death to do so; for I know, Lord, that to you the fulfillment of your vow means more than life—or love."

"That is true," said Walter abstractedly.

He was plunged in thought. That she herself believed this fantastically strange and impossible story, was quite obvious; along the caravan route, he had heard much of these evil spirits and ghostly attackers. Never, though, had anyone previously mentioned the name of Ung Khan in connection with them.

What to believe? He crossed himself furtively and struggled with the facts. He was well assured that evil spirits existed; this was easiest of all to credit, for everyone knew that devils inhabited the desert. What puzzled him was that Prester John and his folk, who had certainly been good Christians, should now be devils and spirits of evil. Well, no use trying to understand; he might learn much more tomorrow. So, like many a better man, he consigned theological riddles to limbo, and turned his mind to the woman beside him.

She stirred him, as she would have stirred any man; he was well aware of her liking for him; yet, in his simple way, he regarded her as a pagan, a worshiper of idols, and forced himself to fight against her charm.

"Why," he demanded suddenly, "do you say that it means death to visit the palace of Ung Khan?"

"I don't know," she rejoined. "So it is said; people have gone there and have not come back, so it must be true. Perhaps the evil spirits live there."

"Ah! That must be it. Well, they'll not hurt us" he exclaimed vigorously. "I'll take the letter of the Pope with us; besides, the sign of the Cross will banish any devils. So have no fear."

She laughed softly, sadly. "I have none, Lord T'ie Kia, if you are with me!" Her hand went to the lute again, and she gently repeated the refrain of the queer little song. Once more Walter frowned at its haunting familiarity, but could not place it.

He gave her the coral, which was rare in this heart of Asia; she was delighted as a child. They sat, talking, till the lantern flickered out, and talked on while the moon mounted the sky, still ominously tinged by the sand-dust floating on the eternal wind that blew from the high peaks. Outside, the two slave-girls twittered and laughed, and from the Khan's great hall the thin sound of music and dancing and drunken song drifted faintly across the garden.

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WHEN the party there broke up, and flitting lights showed the guests being assisted away, Walter stirred; he found himself with Lady San-kao practically in his arms, and in his heart such a joyous bliss as he had never felt. Therefore, he reasoned, it must be wicked, since she was a pagan, and he lost no time in departing, after arranging to meet her on the morrow.

But, as he went his way into the darkness, it was with a strange mingling of happiness and of regret, and the words of the singular little song followed him in farewell, with the inexplicable sense of familiarity in its tinkling refrain:

The wind blows and the stars twinkle above the hill,
As they did when we, like you, rode this way;
But now we know all that you have yet to learn.

He went to his own chamber, where the Tartar servant snored, got out his long straight sword and wiped it well, wiped his mail-shirt, produced the crucifix that Friar Sergius had bequeathed to him, plumped down on his knees and prayed, and tumbled into bed. But, despite the crucifix still clutched in his hands, he dreamed of the lovely, vivacious pagan features of Lady San-kao, and heard her gentle, mournfully cadenced voice pronouncing his Chinese name; and when he wakened, staring into the moonglow with startled eyes, it was all in vain that he invoked the blessed saints to banish the thought of her. So, sensibly, he ceased trying.

He was oddly worried by her premonition about the morrow; the very inflection of her voice showed how deeply she was convinced that it meant death to guide him to the palace of Prester John. Absurd! Such pagan superstitions were not for him. Still, he knew in his heart that she would do it wholly for his sake; this was at once disturbing and heartwarming.

He recalled his vow to the dying Sergius, his undertaking to deliver the papal letter at the palace of Prester John. His eyes widened. Why, sure enough! The morrow would see his errand accomplished, his vow fulfilled! Whether Ung Khan lived or was dead, no matter; here was the way out, and no evasion either! Upon this pleasant reflection, he slept again. . . .

With the morrow, then, he was up and about very early, in high spirits. To the astonished old Tartar, Hung, he confided the surprising news that they were not going on to China at all; that, in fact, they were probably

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returning westward in a day or two; and that he himself was sallying forth this day to do battle with all the evil spirits and devils of the desert. He was only half serious in this, but the battered old Tartar peered at him anxiously.

"And if you do not return, Lord?"

"Why, then go back and bear word of me to any priest or monk you find, and go your way!" said Walter, laughing.

He got out the papal letter, with its huge lead seals, all enclosed in a water-tight cylinder; rubbed up his hauberk afresh and polished his steel cap; and dressed himself with care, when he had scraped his face clean. Mid-morning found him ready, and he sent Hung for his horse. A keen wind was blowing as usual, but the sun shone brightly.

He girded on the long, straight sword, hung the crucifix about his neck, and donned the muffling skin coat and hood that concealed all except the aquiline lines of his face. Passing outside, he found the horse waiting, and at the saddle-bow hung the letter-cylinder by its carry-strap. He was just mounting when Lady San-kao appeared, clattering up to join him with a gay greeting.

She parted her fur to show him the coral necklace at her throat. Laughing, he leaned far over in the saddle, caught her hand, and pressed his lips to her slim fingers. A party of Chinese, passing, looked with horrified incredulity at these actions; the sister of the Khan thus conducting herself, and riding alone with a barbarian! Still, these people of Taklamakhan were more than half barbarians anyway, and unversed in rules of conduct.

Laughing, jesting, in huge joy that the end of his labor and travels was now in sight, Walter rode out beside her. Here in the gorge along the water, built half on former islets of the stream, the town was sheltered from the keen wind; but once they had left it and mounted to the height above, where the Silk Road ran, the snowy wind hit hard. A huge caravan had come to rest near the caravanserais, eastward bound; seeing the two riders setting forth alone, a number of the camel-men ran toward them with shouts of warning. They drew rein.

The fur-muffled men surrounded them, all talking at once. The caravan, which had just come in, had encountered peril not twenty miles from town. Evil spirits had assailed them, ghostly parties of horsemen had killed some of the guards; these ghosts had worn ancient armor and had made wild music with drums and trum-

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pets. And, when the caravan closed up and made a firm head of resistance, they had vanished in a puff of sand.

Laughing, Walter jested heartily when the two rode on, leaving behind the well-meant warnings.

"Ghosts or devils, we're safe from them!" he cried, indicating his crucifix. "Besides, when have ghostly weapons prevailed against steel and iron? No danger!"

"That remains to be seen, Lord T'ie Kia. Those ghostly riders, evidently, were Ung Khan and his company."

"More likely, imagination," he scoffed. "If you're right, then we're doubly safe; do I not bear this letter to Ung Khan himself?"

This was a reassuring thought.

THE two of them rode hard and far, and saw no living thing. Noon came, and Lady San-kao pointed to a huge expanse of jutting rocks and twisted dead trees ahead.

"There!" she exclaimed. "The palace of Ung Khan!"

So Walter comprehended that there was no place after all, but the ruins of one, amid the ruins of a vanished civilization and forest. It made no difference, he reflected; his vow would be fulfilled just the same.

Devils? Evil spirits? Looking back in the direction of the ancient, lonely Silk Road, Walter of Sicily could well believe anything possible in this eerie land. All the desert seemed on the move, now in puffs and flurries that hid half the landscape, again in high invisible swarms of sand that turned the blue sky to brazen yellow, and dulled the sun. Not hard to imagine anything happening in such a country. He crossed himself and rode on.

The two of them came in among the long-dead, twisted poplars, only half uncovered by the sand. A cry of astonishment broke from Lady San-kao as they headed among the rocks.

"Look! It's all uncovered! And when I was here before, almost nothing showed!"

"So you've been here before this, eh?" And Walter uttered a loud, joyous laugh. "Ha, curiosity! Ho, Ung Khan!" His voice lifted in resounding tones upon the emptiness. "Visitors for you, Prester John! An errand from afar!"

Before them the palace lay silent, swept for the moment almost bare of sand. A palace once, perhaps, and a city stretching for miles, blurred by whirls of drifting sand-eddies. A palace of dry stark timbers, huge, cavernous, roofless. They rode up, dis-

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mounted, and tethered the horses.

From his saddle, Walter took the precious cylinder that had come so far, and walked beside his companion into the dead palace. He could not doubt it was the place he sought; those massive, eroded beams showed deep carvings, among them the Cross and other religious emblems. They came to what had been a hall and stepped on a mosaic stone pavement bare in spots of its sandy covering. Walter faced the upper part, halted, flung up his hand.

"A message, Ung Khan!" roared his voice. "Greetings from him who sits in Rome, and a letter! Is it your will to receive it?"

As it chanced, a scurry of wind lifted the sand at the far end, lifted and whirled it up in an eddying shape. From Lady San-kao broke a cry of terror; to her eyes it seemed like a response to the challenge. But Walter saw it for what it was, and with a laugh strode forward into the whirling sand, and laid down the cylinder.

"The vow is accomplished!" he declared, and made the sign of the Cross. "Now, in the name of God, accept my charge!"

He faced about, and halted in astonishment. Here in the ancient building, and among the near-by masses of rock, all the sand began to be moved and stirred by the wind. It rustled against the dry, glass-brittle wood, and then a singing sound arose, strident, thin, and far off.

Walter recognized it instantly; he had heard the same sound among the rocks on the previous day, the sound of singing sands. But he recognized something else, and stood staring at the girl in sudden comprehension. This music of the sand was an oddly monotonous sound, yet definite, like a song that had only two notes.

"The song, Lady San-kao!" he burst out. "Your song! There it is!"

She nodded, though fearfully.

"Yes," she answered. "Now you understand why I said it was your song—this song of the singing sands that the camelmen sometimes chant as they walk along! If— Ah! Listen!"

She went white to the lips. From somewhere came a new and distant sound; the rolling beat of Mongol drums, the thin clash of cymbals, the blare of trumpets. It was so real, so distinct, that for an instant Walter felt fear clutch at him, but, with an abrupt oath, he strode past her, came hastily out to the entrance, and looked.

A cloud of sand was sweeping down upon the lost city and palace. Horsemen with it, two-score and more, wearing strange an-

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cient armor, carrying strange weapons. They had sighted the tethered horses, and now began to spread out. Something whirred in the air, whirred and whistled and sang shrill. Lady San-kao caught at him.

"Arrows! Singing arrows!"

"Then, by God, they're real!" Walter whipped out his sword. "Real or false, pagan or devil, flesh or spirit—look on this!" He held up the cross-hilt, high. "St. George! Send help against these spirits of evil! St. Michael! To the rescue of good Christian folk! One of them, at least, a good Christian," he added hastily.

The words were still on his lips when the girl beside him cried out again, and caught him, turning him around. He looked, and his jaw fell. There among the rocks above appeared other figures of men, strangely dressed and armed. More arrows flew, arrows with pierced heads that whistled and shrilled high as they passed through the air. But the shafts, from one side and the other, were not directed at the two who stood here.

SUDDENLY the scales fell from Walter's eyes; superstition left him, in a blaze of comprehension.

"Ha! By the saints, I have it!" he cried, catching the girl in a wild and joyous hug in his eagerness. "Look! No devils at all, no evil spirits; this explains everything! Desert men, Huns or Tungans or Mongols—caravan raiders! They fear to attack the caravans direct, but sweep down with sandstorm or night, luring the guards, killing a camel here and one there in the lagging file —ha! Devils? All nonsense! Here are two bands of them, enemies! They care nothing about us—"

She too understood, and shared his laughing exultation as all thought of the supernatural passed in prosaic, reasoned explanation. His words were true. Here in the bared old ruins, perhaps, each of the raiding bands were seeking shelter from the sandstorm. As the two figures watched, the opposing parties circled out, swept away, and were lost amid a clash of arms and a roll of drums as the sand hid them.

Walter sheathed his sword, turned to Lady San-kao, and caught hold of her.

"So let all idle fancies perish!" he exclaimed. "You are mine, I am yours; by the saints, I'll make a good Christian of you yet! Do you understand? Will you go with me into the west?"

"Yes," she whispered, lifting her face to his. "Yes, oh, yes! But I think we had better be quick about it—the sandstorm promises to be a bad one!"

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Roaring with laughter, he put her into the saddle; they headed away, with the storm sweeping and hissing behind them and the sky there a dull yellow.

IT was a supreme moment, a wildly joyous moment, with life swept clear and all paths straightened, and ahead the road to life opening before them, as the great Silk Road opened when they won back to it and headed for the city again. Yet it lasted for only this little while, as the horses galloped.

Sand clouded everything ahead of them, as behind—and this was a strange thing. They came to the rocks where they had been on the previous day, where the long rocky ledge barred the desert from the fields and groves and town. There Walter drew rein suddenly.

"Listen! This is where we heard the singing sands first. Ah! God's love!"

His sudden startled ejaculation rang high. Higher still rang the burst of voices from beyond the rocky height; no singing sands now, but a wild tumultuous screaming of folk, both men and women, in utter mad panic. It surged up and up. People appeared on the rocks, running and staggering and shrieking, women holding babes, men wild-eyed, soldiers, tradesmen. At sight of the two on horseback, the wild sobbing cries became shrieks of rage.

"What is it? What has happened?" demanded Lady San-kao.

A howl of fury answered her.

"The dikes have burst! A wall of water and gravel higher than the city has swept it away—all are dead—the city is gone! It's your doing, you who have betrayed the gods and companied with the foreign devil—"

It was fearfully sudden and terrible. Arrows flew, a spear darted, weapons flashed. One low cry burst from Lady San-kao as a barbed shaft thudded; a wilder, more passionate shout of grief and fury from Walter, and his long sword whirled. His horse leaped into the throng and he struck to right and left. They fled away from before him and were gone, all save the dead, and he spurred back to where Lady San-kao still sat her steed among the rocks, her head drooping.

He saw the feathered shaft protruding from between her breasts, and tore at her with frantic fingers to bare the wound; one glance told him all was useless, and a bitter groan came from him.

Her eyes opened, mistily. Her fingers went to his, twined about them, and a smile touched her wan lips.

"Dear—dear T'ie Kia!" she

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murmured. "It does not matter; nothing matters. I am happy. And listen, listen to what the sands are singing—"

To him came the odd little two-note whisper of the sand among the rocks, as the yellow waves beat down upon them and muffled out the whole world, and her voice repeated, faintly and more faintly:

The wind blows and the stars twinkle above the hill,
As they did when we, like you, rode this way;
But now we know all—all that you—that you have yet—to learn—

Her voice died out, her hand fell, the yellow sandswirls beat down upon them and the dim figures vanished completely.

Vanished in darkness; only the faint sound lingering, the distant, thin sound of the singing sands. And this too ended. In the silence, Norman Fletcher switched on the room-lights.

* * *

Fletcher reached for a cigar, then turned and looked at us. Not a man of us moved or even spoke, for a long moment. Then somebody sighed, and the tension broke.

"By gad!" burst forth Wallach, his eyes shining. "Fletcher, you have something there! A logical, simple explanation of Marco Polo's remarks; more, reality and human interest—why, those people were living people!"

"Of course." Norman Fletcher smiled at his enthusiasm, and glanced at me. "I trust you found it satisfactory?"

Unable to find words, I merely nodded; but my friend Parker spoke for me. He leaned forward in his intent way.

"I could add a touch or so to that story," he said quietly. "But first, may I ask what subject you're going to take up next week?"

"Perhaps you have a suggestion?" our host asked courteously.

"Well," said Parker, with hesitation, "I'm bound for North Africa, but I'd stay over if you'd undertake to look into a pet hobby of mine—the old myth about the Amazons, the country of fighting ladies, you know. There are many theories about it; but I'd give a week of my time to learn where it really started!"

"I'll be very glad to attempt it, Mr. Parker. And just what is the touch you could add to this story from a thousand years ago?"

"Well, I've been to that very place we just saw, for one thing," rejoined Parker. "I've heard those singing sands, have written about them. But the

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queer part of it is that the city in question was actually buried by a flood, as related at the close of the story—and was uncovered a few years ago by the wind! Sven Hedin the explorer passed by and saw it."

Then he became silent. Our meeting broke up, and I don't think Parker said another word; he seemed preoccupied. But, as I was driving him back to the city, he touched my arm and spoke.

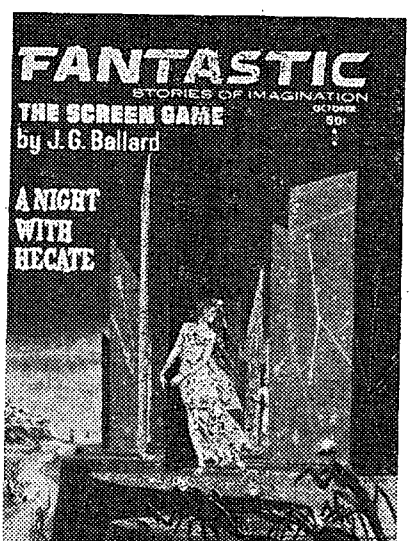
"Funny thing; do you know, the camel-men up in the Lopnor country still chant that apparently meaningless song as they stride along with the camels? Fact. And, until tonight, I never understood it." He quoted the words softly: *"But now we know all that you have yet to learn."*

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

On Mars, a mysterious girl with jewelled insects as her pets wanders through a man-made maze . . . and that's the setting for **J.G. Ballard's** *The Screen Game*, a penetrating novelet that is featured in the October issue of FANTASTIC.

Also in next month's issue, *A Night With Hecate*, the story of a goddess who is in danger of losing her last worshippers, and the penalties she exacts; other short stories and all our regular departments.



Be sure to get October Fantastic, on sale at your newsstand Sept. 24.

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Illustrator ADKINS

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VANITY, THY NAME IS

By RON GOULART

Plumrose, detective of the occult, faces a question of ghostly thefts, jealous poltergeists and disappearing boxers. All most confusing, especially to young Willsey, still unreturned to 1961, who does all the work.

I WAS trying to decide whether I should stay in 1897 and so I wasn't paying much attention to the fight. Edwin Plumrose jumped up from the chair next to me and said, "Ferguson is going to take him."

"So soon?" I asked. "It's only the 27th round."

Plumrose glanced quickly at me, his white moustache and beard flickering brightly in the torchlit old barn. "My Cousin Nathan once watched a flock of blue-winged warblers for three solid weeks in the interest of science. Here you have an opportunity to see Walloping Ferguson destroy Kid McDermott with scientific footwork that rivals, and in some ways outdoes, that of Corbett and you sit and sulk."

"It's just," I said, "that I keep thinking you could be home fixing the time machine."

"Go to it, Ferguson," Plumrose shouted.

There were some three hundred other sports fans in the old barn and they were shouting, too. I was trying to come to an ethical decision and all this noise was distracting. "In 1961, where I should be," I said, "I could see two fights and a dozen commercials in this time."

The 27th round ended and Plumrose said to me, "When I suggested coming to this clandestine boxing exhibition you were agreeable, Willsey. You implied you might seriously be thinking of staying on as my house guest and assistant. Giving up your notions of 1961. An uncle of mine once spent two and a half years in Oslo, Norway, although he had originally stepped off the train only to buy a souvenir."

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I nodded. "I like 1897 and all. I think maybe I should go home to my right time, though. That time ray of yours snatched me here sort of unexpectedly."

"If you hadn't come you wouldn't have been able to save Emily Southwell from the attentions of the Nob Hill Fiend," said Plumrose, "Besides."

The bell sounded for a new round. "Besides what?"

"You love Emily Southwell," Plumrose shouted, his eyes again on the ring. "Don't you?"

"I guess I do," I shouted back. "But I feel odd loving somebody who was born in the nineteenth century."

"Love knows no boundaries," said Plumrose, rocking happily as the fight went on.

I SHRUGGED and tried to pay attention to the boxers. The time ray had accidently been broken when I hit the Nob Hill Fiend over the head with it to prevent him from attacking Emily with an assortment of surgical tools. Since I'd gotten to know Emily I wasn't that anxious to go back to 1961.

"The footworks reminds me of my Uncle Leon," Plumrose said.

"He was a boxer?"

"No, he just had nice feet."

Walloping Ferguson was a wide shouldered heavyweight and had a dapper half-smiling way of fighting. Kid McDermott was heavier and speckled all over with orange freckles. His long orange trunks matched his straight standing hair. Ferguson had knocked the Kid down several times and seemed about to do it again.

I hunched to one side to get a better angle of viewing. Glancing toward Ferguson's corner I noticed a tall young man standing beside Ferguson's handlers. The guy had a thick chestnut moustache and was wearing a suit like mine with the same very high and uncomfortable stiff shirt collar. At least it was, being my first 1897 outfit, uncomfortable for me. The man was smiling and laughing with the Walloping Ferguson crew.

Kid McDermott was slowing, puffing hard. He sparkled with sweat in the torchlight. Walloping Ferguson got a nice left jab in under the Kid's faltering guard and was in the act of following it with a right to the chin. And then Walloping Ferguson wasn't there anymore.

He had blurred for a part of a second and then suddenly vanished completely. The sudden silence of the crowd seemed to expand and push against the shadowy walls of the big barn. There was no movement, no sound at all. The man with the chestnut moustache ducked under the ropes and ran for the center of the ring.

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All at once the silence broke and movement started, as though off somewhere someone had just kissed the sleeping beauty. The fans jumped, shouted, pushed ahead, tangling and fighting.

"Supernormal," said Plumrose and grabbed my arm.

"Rigged. Rigged for sure," yelled two seamen as they fought by us.

WE were working against the crowd, angling for one of the small side doors. We finally elbowed and kneed free out into the night. We had, however, come out on the edge of a steep grassy incline and as more of the crowd found their way out Plumrose and I went bumbling down hill.

We lost momentum midway and stopped in a clump of brush, spreadeagled a few feet apart.

"Magic?" I asked, helping Plumrose up once I'd righted myself.

"What?" he asked. "The strange disappearance of Walloping Ferguson? I have a feeling no. Unfortunately he was very near to putting Kid McDermott away for good. Such excellent footwork."

"Odd way to fix a fight," I said as we made our way down. "Don't you want to investigate?"

"Later someone may want to pay me to do it," said Plumrose, brushing grass and burrs from his dark coat sleeves. "And later there'll be less chance of being trampled. My Cousin Pawnee once had an unfortunate experience with a group of longhorns."

"Wait now," called a tenor voice behind us. "Halt if you please."

We had both reached the street and we turned to look up the slope. "It's Inspector Rafferty McAfferty," I said. "Pride of the San Francisco police force."

"Arresting us for attendng an illegal fight?" asked Plumrose.

"No, no," said McAfferty. He tipped his derby and his spongey red moustache bobbed with excitement. "It is far more serious business that brings me here after you." He caught his breath. "Stopping by your house to consult you I learned from your good housekeeper, Mrs. Hoggins, that you two buckos had come along here. I was about to enter when I saw you and all those other lads come exploding out. Would there be trouble?"

"In a way," said Plumrose and told the inspector what had happened.

"This is a strange city, this San Francisco," said McAfferty. "Strange things are apt to go on. Some of my men were attending the fight tonight and they can look into the problem of Ferguson. I have my own problems."

Plumrose cocked his head, frowning. "I believe there's a

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saloon a block or so from here. Can you tell us your troubles there, Rafferty?"

"That I can," said Rafferty McAfferty, his tenor voice quavering.

WHEN we had all seated ourselves at a round wood table in the small stove-heated saloon and tried our beers the inspector said, "It is a ghost burglar I've come to grief over, Edwin."

"Ghost burglar?" Plumrose smiled, relaxing back in his chair.

"You know," said McAfferty, "that although I have consulted you often, Edwin, I have never consulted you unless I was face to face with the unknown. That is so, isn't it?" He inhaled, drank some of his beer. "The first few times this burglar struck I didn't fright. Often, as you know, witnesses give imaginative accounts of what they've really seen. So even though the witnesses in this case are from among the finest San Francisco families I tended not to give too much credit to their stories."

"The details?" asked Plumrose.

"Houses," said McAfferty. "Fine mansions and splendid homes. This thing gets inside, through locked doors and windows, past servants and retainers. It makes off with paintings, jewels, money, stocks and bonds, fine old silver and heirlooms and other items of value."

"What is it the witnesses say?"

"Those who have seen anything," said McAfferty, "say they saw their valuable possessions go floating down the corridors and hallways and go drifting away on the night wind."

Plumrose smiled at me. "Wonderful," he said. "But what made you come to me now, Rafferty? Do you believe in this phantom thief now?"

The inspector closed his eyes. "Edwin," he said, "not three hours ago I saw the thing myself." His eyes came open, wide and round. His moustache drooped. "I could not bring myself to follow the thing. Panic and fear seized hold of me and I let that ghostly bucko make off with Tuveson Candler's best silver service." He shivered. "It was the spectacle of all those spoons and forks dancing across the twilight lawn that curtailed my bravery. I have to admit it. I turn to you for help, Edwin."

Plumrose sipped his beer, then said, "How did you come to be at Tuveson Candler's?"

"Candler had asked me to stop by in relation to another matter. Some young bucko who was angry at Candler for denying him membership in the Romany Club. A minor thing," said McAfferty, "but when San Francisco's second wealthiest man has a minor

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complaint, well then, an inspector calls. It was while I was in his study that we heard odd sounds and screams from below. I investigated. That was when I saw the ghost burglar carrying the silver out of the dining room." The inspector lowered his head.

"Cheer up," said Plumrose. "My Cousin Harrison once let a small dog chase him seven miles. At any rate, I'll take on the case. Can you provide me with information on all the robberies? I haven't seen any mention of this in the newspapers."

"I've kept it down to next to nothing," said McAfferty. "Ghost rumors can cause panic. Or ridicule." He sighed. "I left my file on this case back at your house with Mrs. Hoggins. You will look into this then?"

"Not only that," said Plumrose. "I'll solve it within three days." He smiled again and finished his beer.

I WAS sitting in one of the bentwood rockers in Plumrose's study, watching the rain through the half shuttered windows. The overgrown garden was filled with a scattering of statuary and I liked to watch the rain slide down the Venuses and cupids and the elks and satyrs. It was a half hour before breakfast and there was a fire in the fireplace. Plumrose had not come down yet and I wandered over to his desk and looked at the bent parts of the time ray.

"There's one here already," said Mrs. Hoggins, sliding through the doorway.

I turned. "One what?"

"Client," she said, her hands hidden in her striped apron. "A dissolute looking little man with a large nose. Since you seem to be acting as Mr. Plumrose's assistant you might take him off my hands."

"Sure."

"And," she said, "you might tell Mr. Plumrose that the tarot cards have nothing good to say about him today."

"Anything specific?"

"I dropped the pack while I was taking them out of the box," Mrs. Hoggins said. "That was enough of a sign for me and I went no further."

"I'll tell him."

"Mr. Marcus Mack," she said and left.

A small wiry man with thinning white hair, a clean shaven face and the large round nose of a comedian looked in. "Plumrose, is it?"

"No, I'm his assistant, Bert Willsey." I motioned at one of the rockers. "I can talk to you till he gets down."

Mack sat. "You heard about my boy?"

"No."

"The Walloper. He went up in smoke."

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"Wait," I said. "You're Walloping Ferguson's manager?"

"That I am," he said.

"We were at the fight last night. What happened?"

Mack shook his head. "I want to hire you to explain to me. I know Kid McDermott and Cracker Brogan are behind it. Still it's like no jinx or evil eye I know of and I've handled three dozen boys in my time. All good fighters, except Sailor Alch and he went on the stage anyway."

"My Uncle Berkshire once understudied Sailor Alch in a swing through the midwest," said Plumrose, coming into the room. He had on one of his art nouveau dressing gowns, the pockets fat with scrolls and fragments of manuscript and assorted occult objects. "Mr. Mack, Walloping Ferguson has the feet of a true scientist. I'll be glad to help you and bring the matter to solution within three days. Now will you please supply any information you can?"

MARCUS MACK did. All he knew actually was that Ferguson had vanished right in the middle of the ring. No one had made any threats before the fight, no one had contacted him since. Walloping Ferguson was a strong contender for the heavyweight title and maybe some Fitzsimmons fans had put a spell on him. Maybe Kid McDermott's circle had done it. But it seemed odd that they let him take a beating for twenty-seven rounds before they pulled their trick.

Nothing that had happened the day of the fight seemed to provide a clue. Ferguson had mentioned nothing strange to his manager before or during the fight. Ferguson had, late in the afternoon, complained of a headache and gone over to see Dr. Anthony Hatch. Hatch was a young doctor who had an interest in the ring. Mack had already talked with him and Dr. Hatch said there had been nothing wrong with Ferguson.

Plumrose nodded and smiled throughout Mack's account. "Three days, Mack, and I'll have Walloping Ferguson back to you. The fee is one hundred dollars. I'd like to solve this for nothing, being an admirer of yours, but I'm already doing a feeless case for the police department."

"A hundred is no problem," said Mack, taking a bill from his wallet. "You come highly recommended by all the sports writers in town I trust." He handed Plumrose the money. "Shall I do anything?"

"You don't have to do anything," said Plumrose.

After Marcus Mack had driven off in the rain I said, "I guess the time machine gets put off three days now."

Plumrose grinned and put the

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hundred dollars in a pocket of the dressing gown. "This afternoon, sometime after three, we'll visit the barn where last night's contest took place. Now I want to read over the reports on the phantom burglar. Why don't you go see Emily?"

"Don't solve anything without me," I said.

The rain was stopping and I made it to Emily's by streetcar without getting wet or lost.

BASCOM, the Southwell butler, showed me into a parlor and I stood watching some cloth flowers under a bell glass until Emily came in.

"Bert," she said.

I smiled at her. "Hello, Emily." She was a slender girl with auburn hair. The blouse and long dark skirt she was wearing did not seem as different as they had when I first met her. I was thinking of her as more and more of a contemporary. That doesn't quite say it. What I mean is I was feeling more relaxed about being in love with a girl from 1897.

"I was going to write you," she said, taking my hand. "In fact, I had only this moment decided on the kind of stationery."

That was fine. In 1961 girls in the same city with me seldom wrote me letters. "Do you want to tell me or do you still feel like writing it instead?"

She said, "I can tell you. Clarissa Steepleton has poltergeists."

I let go of her. "You were going to write me about an occult case?"

"Yes," she said. "Poltergeists shouldn't be too hard to get rid of. I thought if you could handle it alone you would be able to prove to Mr. Plumrose that you are worth your hire."

"Plumrose has to keep me on. It's his fault I'm stranded here."

"Don't you want to be here, in my time?"

"Yes," I said. "But I don't have to prove anything to Plumrose."

"Occult detective work pays well," said Emily, turning away. "People could well afford to get married on an occult detective's salary."

Taking hold of her shoulders I said, "Okay, I'll fix the poltergeists."

"That's splendid," Emily said, apparently confident.

"What are they?"

"Why, noisy spirits, of course. Prankish ghosts who knock things about and raise mischief unseen."

"And Clarissa Steepleton is bothered by them."

"For the past several weeks. At such an inopportune time."

"Why?"

Emily moved to a square ball-footed table and picked up a cardboard backed photo. "This is Clarissa and her fiancé."

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THE girl was a frail blonde with large bright eyes and a high forehead. She was pretty and mean looking. The guy standing stiffly next to her chair was in his late thirties, wide and dark with slick middle-parted hair and a large black moustache. I think the thing that bothered me most about 1897 was the prevalence of moustaches. "Who's the man?"

"Tuveson Candler," said Emily. "Some say he's the . . ."

". . . second richest man in San Francisco."

"You know him?"

"No," I said. "Inspector McAfferty mentioned him to Plumrose and me." I tapped the picture with my thumb. "I assume Clarissa, too, is wealthy."

"Her father is Theodore Steepleton, the shady railroad man," said Emily. "He's affable enough for a monopolist, I suppose. They hint that he's *the* richest man in San Francisco."

"Fine. Has anything been stolen from her home lately? Anything turn up missing?"

"No. Poltergeists usually don't steal."

"Tell me what Clarissa told you about these things."

Emily went to the window. The rain had ended and the wide lawns outside glistened as the sun hit them. "Every now and then something falls over. Once a vase was thrown."

"Thrown at who?" I asked.

"At Tuveson. I believe it was while he and Clarissa were playing duets in the music conservatory."

"Has she seen things floating around in the air?"

"Only the vase."

I sat down on a flowered love seat. "I'd like to talk to Clarissa."

"We'll see her at the Merrihugh's ball this evening," said Emily, crossing to me and sitting beside me.

"Big Jim Merrihugh, the grain tycoon. That's right. We are supposed to go there."

"What's a tycoon?"

"Something like a monopolist."

"I hope," said Emily, "there won't be a scene at this ball."

"What do you mean?"

"A month ago," she said, touching my arm, "before you arrived, I attended a similar affair at the Merrihugh's. I went with . . . with Leo. X. Guthrie, I'm afraid."

Guthrie was the Nob Hill Fiend I had saved her from. "And what happened?"

"A young man who had fallen in love with Clarissa forced his way in, he had not been invited, and said some insulting things to several of the guests. He was asked to leave."

"Know who he was?"

Emily said, "A doctor. Dr.

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Anthony Hatch, I believe Clarissa said. She met him by accident when she twisted her ankle on a cable car cable and he . . ."

"Anthony Hatch," I said. "Wait now. That's the same doctor who treated Walloping Ferguson before he vanished." I got up, pulling Emily with me. "I may have some investigating to do tonight."

"On the poltergeists?"

"Among other things. Will you wait for me here?"

"Father is going to attend the Merrihugh's party, too. I can go in our carriage with him and meet you there."

"Good," I said. "That's what we'll do." I leaned forward and kissed her.

"Tea is served," announced Bascom at the doorway.

Emily's father was a tea tycoon so, despite the hour, we couldn't turn it down.

PLUMROSE, in a fresh dressing gown, was sitting on his striped love seat, his nose touching the rim of his brandy glass. "Hatch," he said. "Interesting. According to Inspector McAfferty's notes Anthony Hatch is the man Tuveson Candler said was annoying him about the Romany Club."

"That makes too many coincidences," I said. "Because last night at the fight, when everyone else was stunned, one guy jumped into the ring. I bet that was Dr. Anthony Hatch, too."

"The vanishing heavyweight, the phantom burglar and the jealous poltergeist," said Plumrose. "Could Hatch be the source of the whole business?"

"Walloping Ferguson did go to him right before the fight."

"It might be possible that young Dr. Hatch has stumbled onto some compound or solution that causes invisibility. Though, lord knows, the solution to the invisibility problem has eluded my own researches."

"What about the clothes?" I asked. "Ferguson went gloves and trunks and shoes."

"There could be a drug," said Plumrose, "that causes the illusion of invisibility or that causes the body to give off a force that effects cloth, fabric, leather. That's one of the things that has held me back. Who wants to run around in the buff while invisible? But Hatch seems to have solved it."

"Ferguson could have taken some of the stuff by accident, unless he's an accomplice. When Hatch saw him vanish he knew what had happened. Probably dragged Ferguson out in the confusion and knocked him out or something."

"Ferguson has not reappeared. If Hatch is the one behind it he must have him locked up."

I refilled my brandy glass.

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"Since Hatch is getting tossed out of the better places regularly I imagine he's not wealthy. He probably needs money to try and win Clarissa and get into clubs like the Romany. So he steals from the rich."

"The Merrihugh's ball is tonight, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You think he'll try something there?"

"More likely he'll visit the homes of the guests while they're out." Plumrose squinted one eye. "Paint."

"Or a net," I said.

He looked at me. "You're reading my thoughts on how to make an invisible burglar visible."

"That's how they always do it in the movies," I said. "The motion pictures."

"That thing of Edison's, yes."

"Or you could use flour or some kind of powder."

"I'll contact Inspector McAfferty and supervise that part of the business," said Plumrose. "I'll get a list of the guests from old Merrihugh and cross off the ones who have already been robbed by the phantom burglar. He should try for one of the remaining names."

"Do I come along with you?"

"No. You go over to Hatch's place and watch him. Look up his address in my directory. Try to get in when he leaves and find some trace of Walloping Ferguson or an invisibility compound."

"I'll head out right after dinner."

"I doubt if there'll be dinner," said Plumrose. "Mrs. Hoggins tells me that the trolls have made off with the roast."

"We do a hell of a lot of detection on an empty stomach," I said.

DR. Anthony Hatch had his home and office on Green Street down near North Beach. It was a narrow dull brown two-story building hunched in between two wide dark houses with dismal yards. I was standing across the street under a eucalyptus tree, watching the place. It was night now and there were lights on in Hatch's lower windows. All the shades were drawn.

I stuck a finger in my collar to loosen it some and then ran over to the wreck of a house on the left of Hatch. The house was unlit and silent, its windows dusty, its gingerbread askew. I moved alongside it and into Hatch's backyard. Off in his small weathered stable a horse snorted. Then steps sounded in the house and I dropped down behind a box hedge. Hatch came out of the house and ran to the stable. He was the same man I'd seen jump into the ring when Walloping Ferguson had disappeared.

"No more, no more," he said as

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he got the horse hitched to the buggy. In a moment he was driving rapidly away.

I stayed down in the bushes for awhile. The sky was clear tonight and stars were showing up. Finally I moved in closer to the house, listening. There was no sound. Plumrose had loaned me a ring of keys he had collected. The third one I tried unlocked Hatch's back door.

I went into an uncarpeted corridor that was filled with the harsh smell of medicines. I got used to the darkness and started checking around from room to room. The downstairs rooms were empty. Upstairs in a spare bedroom I got an odd sensation. The room looked empty but I had the idea it wasn't. I closed the door behind me and lit a lamp on a shawl covered table.

The metal frame bed had a quilted cover on it and in the cover's center there was a deep depression. "Ferguson?"

A murmuring noise came from the direction of the bed. I went over and gingerly put out my hand. I was touching a big ear. I moved my hand down and felt cloth and a knot. I worked at the invisible knot and got it undone. I pulled at the cloth. It came out of nothingness as though I were pulling it through a hole in a wall. I had a red bandana in my hand.

"Are you some other deranged medical man?" asked a voice.

"No. Are you Walloping Ferguson?"

"The same."

"I'm Bert Willsey and your manager, Marcus Mack, hired us to find you."

"This has taught me a lesson," said Ferguson's voice. "Could you poke around and get at the ropes that are tying me?"

"Sure," I said. "What's happened exactly."

"Well," said the Walloper, "I came over to the doctor's house here late yesterday. A headache had been bothering me and I wanted to get something to fix me up before my fight. Did you see the fight?"

"We did, yes." I got some ropes untied. When they left contact with Ferguson they became visible.

"I had the Kid good."

"He wouldn't have lasted another round."

"But you see, noticing my hand go away into air it threw me off. Then Dr. Hatch was in there saying to come along with him and I'd be all right. Stunned as I was I went along with him. Outside he hit me from behind and when next I came awake I was tied up here."

"Why was Hatch at the fight? Did he give you something there?"

"He was a great fight fan," said Ferguson. "Though I know

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now it was as much to meet the swells who attended as it was to see scientific boxing. As to the drug, I took it myself."

"How?" I asked, getting the last of the ropes.

WELL, the doctor was not here when I arrived yesterday. I have a way with locks and I let myself in, hoping to find a remedy for headaches sitting around. Right there on his desk were two small bottles labeled quite plain. Headache Compound. So I took a couple of pills and drank a glass of water. Two or three hours later I was invisible."

"Hatch was probably out robbing Tuveson Candler while you were here."

"Mr. Candler's a great admirer of my boxing." The bed creaked and Ferguson sat up. "When I saw Dr. Hatch at ringside I told him his headache remedy had done wonderful things for me. He looked at me strange. From then on he kept a watch on me."

"He has the invisibility drug and its antidote out in the open in innocent looking bottles," I said. "He didn't count a patient breaking in."

"I did it because he was such a sporting enthusiast," said Ferguson.

"Do you know what he was going to do with you?"

"Do me in, I'm afraid. We had a chat or two in the day I've been here. Dr. Hatch has had dreams of rising in this town and being the equal of Tuveson Candler. Well, to do that you need money and his practice couldn't bring him that. He told me he had made up this invisible stuff a year ago. He never dared use it until they started snubbing him so soundly." Ferguson laughed. "It takes a good two or three hours to take effect, as I found out. The doctor says it makes the clothes you're wearing invisible, too, if you make sure there's no metal involved. Metal and glass and the like he can't fade out. Quite a handicap for a thief he told me. That's why he lets them think he's a ghost."

"Did he say who he was going to rob tonight?"

"Damn," said Ferguson, apparently standing up. "It's not to be a robbery tonight. He's learned that Miss Clarissa Steepleton is to announce her engagement to Tuveson Candler tonight and he's going to do them some harm. Being rescued has addled my mind I'm afraid."

"You should be able to find the antidote downstairs," I said. "It's probably in that second bottle."

"That it is, according to Hatch."

"I'll get over to the Merrihugh's ball. See you later."

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"I hope you do," called Ferguson as I ran out of the place.

THE Merrihugh mansion was all weeping willows and fluted columns. The high bright French windows showed a crowd of waltzers as I jumped out of my hired cab and ran along a graveled driveway to the main doorway. The butler didn't want to let me in, since I wasn't in formal dress, but I convinced him I was a special messenger of Inspector Rafferty McAfferty and that I had to speak with Miss Steepleton at once.

I spotted a girl who must be Clarissa Steepleton standing with a fat white moustached man. I circled the room, cut in front of the string orchestra and caught her arm. "Miss Steepleton?"

"Lord, Clarissa," said the man with her. "Another of your ill mannered ex-suitors?"

"I'm Bert Willsey, Emily Southwell's friend," I explained.

"Yes?" said Clarissa.

"I think Anthony Hatch is here tonight. He's going to try to hurt you and Tuveson Candler."

"I've made sure Hatch will be turned away," said the man. "I'm Theodore Steepleton." He didn't offer to shake hands.

"That's fine," I said, "except that Hatch may be invisible by now." I looked around the room. "Where's Tuveson Candler?"

"He and Emily were dancing," said Clarissa, shrugging slightly. "They must be out on the terrace."

"My God," I said and ran off in the direction her head had tilted.

Plaster cupids had been set up on mansize columns all across the marble terrace. Beneath a cupid who was dripping fruit out of a horn of plenty stood Emily and a big dark guy who looked to be Tuveson Candler.

"This is hardly the act of a man on this engagement eve," Emily was saying.

Candler snorted and grabbed her. "Only one kiss," he said.

I jumped, caught his shoulder and spun him around. As I hit him with an unscientific punch something happened to the imitation column. It buckled and the cupid fell forward dropping wax apples and grapes.

A few feet away a smoking pistol was hanging in the air. I pushed the slumped Candler over and grabbed Emily. "Get down," I said.

"He surprised me," said Emily, kneeling.

"That's okay," I said, dragging her behind a stone urn that looked real. I glanced out and saw the pistol drifting off toward an open window. "He's going for Clarissa. Stay here."

Keeping my eye on the pistol,

(*continued on page 128*)

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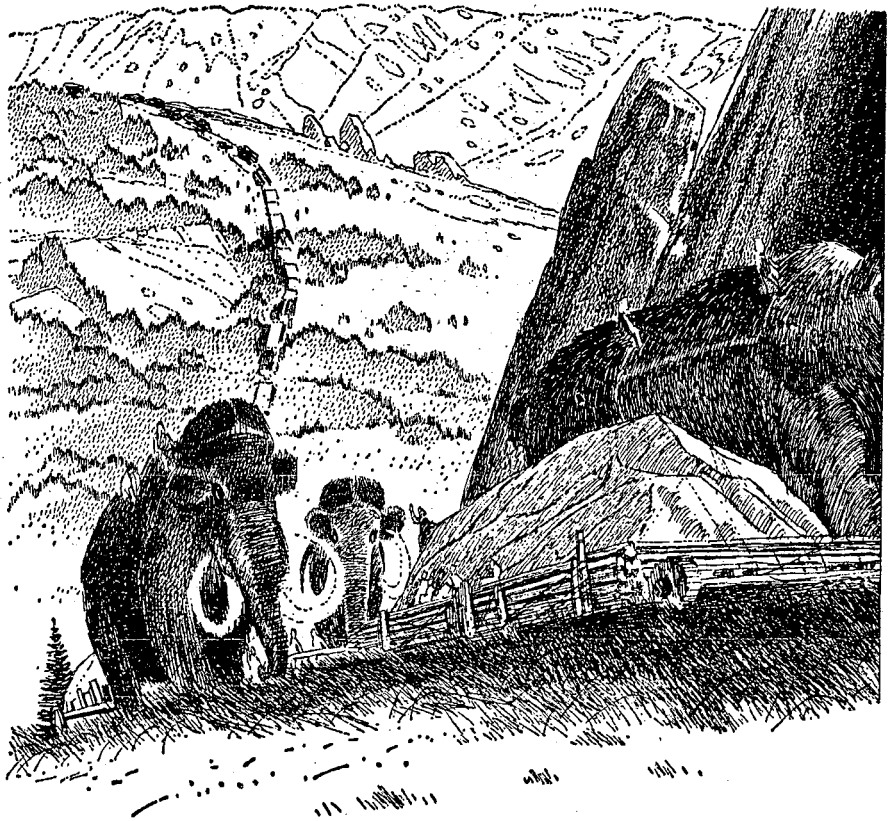

Barayun of Aleyn had a magical device which pointed always in one direction. Unfortunately, that direction unerringly led to . . .

the DEMON of the NORTH

By C. C. MacAPP

Illustrator SCHELLING

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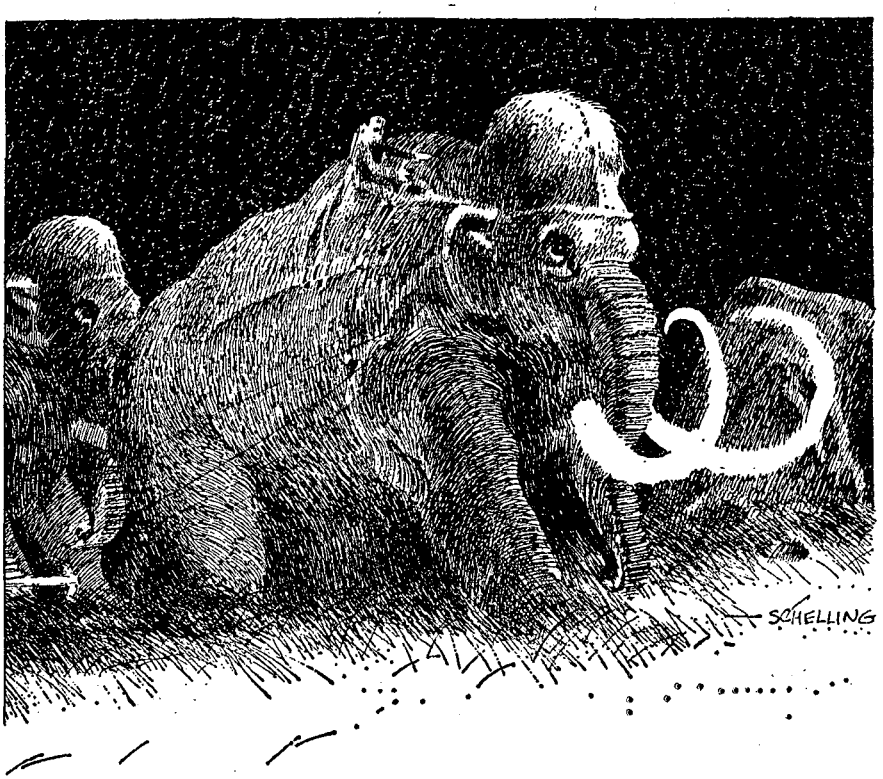

THOUGH the Sibyr had not yet begun to replace bronze with iron, Barayun was impressed with King Hulj's court. The great beams of the ceiling were not pine, as he would have expected, but some dark-red rich hardwood imported from a warmer land. The glass of the windows was clear. There were rugs and tapestries of some coarse fibre that he guessed might be mammoth's wool. He was already familiar with the superb bronze ornamentation and weaponry of the Sibyr, which were items of trade throughout most of the inhabited world.

Hulj was taller than Barayun, and still very erect though the yellow of his hair and beard were streaked with gray. The young woman at his side—his latest queen or consort, Barayun supposed—had hair as yellow as daffodils and eyes like the clear sea

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sky at evening. She wore fine silks, but no jewelry except a striking necklace of pale gold set with rubies. At Hulj's left, standing not on the dais but one step below it, was a man who could hardly be Hulj's son but might be a younger brother or a cousin. This man's eyes, when they rested upon Barayun, were speculative.

Hulj had already received the leaders of two armies come to join the great expedition; a yellow-skinned man from the southeast and a swarthy black-haired one from somewhere to the south. Now he was coping with a language problem as he welcomed a big black-skinned warrior from the continent far to the south and west. Barayun thought of offering his services as interpreter, but he had only a smattering of the black man's language, and Hulj seemed to be disposing of the thing gracefully.

Barayun had been kept waiting until the last; deliberately, he was sure. Now he went forward and knelt. He knew the protocol; his own nation was not yet completely deprived of royalty.

Hulj, his eyes cold, motioned him up. "I am told you speak our tongue."

"Awkwardly, I fear, sire," said Barayun, knowing he spoke it very well. He tried to keep his eyes off the girl. It seemed unfair a man Hulj's age should possess her.

Hulj stared at him uncordially. "You have the unctuousness I would expect. I have met your king, as you no doubt know. The only good I can say of him is that his hair is not quite so outlandish as your own."

Barayun felt his face grow warm. Even among his own people, the bright red of his hair drew comment.

"I suppose," said Hulj, "you have a speech explaining why your king will not send an army."

WITH an inward shrug, Barayun went into the speech. "It was discussed at length, my lord; and the question was asked, what sense in sending warriors to the Sibyr? It would be like carrying fish to the sea. Besides, we have so little familiarity with the cold country that our warriors would be a burden, not a help."

Hulj smiled scornfully. "I could have quoted it myself. Actually, I suppose your king thinks when I have spent enough of my strength fighting the Demon, he can march against me again. If you wish, you can turn home today and tell him that when the time comes I will take a few squads and chase him home as I did before."

Barayun's face went fever-hot. Words burst from him. "I am no

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messenger from one king to another. I was sent by the Council of Aleyn, which orders kings as you order your pants-mender. You have never met soldiers of Aleyn, but only a few freezing mercenaries whom you no doubt bought off with a handful of cheap bronze trinkets. As for invading your lands, from what I have seen I would not pasture swine upon them." He turned his back and started away. Appalled at his own outburst, he expected spears any instant but would not let himself cringe.

"Hold!" roared the king. Blond spearmen seized Barayun and spun him to his knees. "Bring him here!"

They prodded him forward with spear-points. He traded glares with Hulj, but noticed that the young woman fought to suppress laughter and that the man standing beside the dais smirked delightedly.

Hulj had control of his voice. "If you have any other message before being quartered and fed to the wolves, you had best state it promptly."

Barayun, shamed by Hulj's poise, said as evenly as he could, "I was to go with you and observe what is in the north. If it is something that can be fought, Aleyn will move against it with all her strength."

The king thought for what seemed a long time, his eyes gradually losing their fire. He glanced surreptitiously toward the man to his left. Finally, he motioned for the spearmen to withdraw their weapons. "You may go with us so long as you keep out of the way and cause no mischief. I will decide later what to do about your insolence." He beckoned to a stocky, naked-scalped man at the side of the hall who looked as if he'd been in every war and mead-house brawl in the last thirty years and hoped for thirty years more. "This is Gault. He will see to your needs."

Barayun started away, then remembered. "A small gift." Ignoring the king's frown, he took from his cloak the compass in its intricately-inlaid box. "From the Chief of Council himself."

Hulj, his eyes unreadable now, took it and opened the lid. He looked up in surprise. "I have heard of these. Is it true it points always to the Demon?"

"If Demon it be," said Barayun.

"I will send a messenger with thanks," said Hulj. "Later, I will want to hear more of this Council that calls itself above kings. Little as I think of your king, it does not seem a thing I would like."

GAULT, once out of the hall, roared with laughter. "Jord!" he said when he'd gotten control of it, "The way you spoke to him,

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I was already choosing a squad in my mind to carry out the execution. And did you notice Renne's disappointment when it was stayed?"

"Who is Renne?"

"He stood with the king. A cousin, and the pretender. It would suit him well to have Hulj at odds again with Aleyn." He took Barayun's arm and guided him down a side-street. "How goes it with Aleyn these years?"

"Ill," said Barayun with impulsive frankness, liking this man at once. "You have been there?"

"Once; when I was a boy barely old enough to . . . We sailed by the northern sea, past the Isles of Tin and thence down the continent and out to Aleyn. That was before the squabble, and we spent a glad week there. Thence we sailed east to the inland sea guarded by the great rock, and through another small sea or two, and home by land. Aleyn was fair and sunny. Do you freeze as we do?"

"No," said Barayun, "if you suffer from cold here, that is out of step with the world pattern. The warmth is the trouble, we think. You recall how Aleyn lies? In my own lifetime the sea has risen a man's height, and the best ports are abandoned. And that is not the worst. Rain washes our soil into the sea, and drowns crops on what remains. Many have migrated to our colonies. Those who stay live mostly on fish."

Gault shook his head regretfully. "Aleyn was great," he said. He looked at Barayun. "And yet I have heard, red-haired one, that Aleyn does not believe in the Demon."

"We believe in something," Barayun said. "On the continent west of Aleyn, and in most of the north, ancient ice is melting. Red rains fall, as if the sky itself bled. I hope to learn if this Demon of yours is involved."

Gault seemed to have a little trouble with the idea. "You are not a warrior?"

Barayun shook his head. "I am trained in arms, but I . . ." He realized there was no word for 'science' in the Sibyr tongue. "My work is in certain arts in which Aleyn excells."

In the few days before the expedition got under way, Barayun marvelled anew at Hulj's resources. Nearly ten thousand foreign warriors had to be outfitted with clothing for the north. Only the yellow-skinned ones had fur garments of their own. Then there were the kitchens, and the vast trains of wagons—huge sleds, really, with removable wheels—and the food that had to be compiled, and the fodder for beasts.

The armies were organized in-

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to six self-sufficient units, each incorporating some of the foreign warriors to teach them the ways, and each with its own herd of two hundred mammoths and twice as many deer. These last were not the small deer of Aleyn, nor the great elk of the continents near her, but a long-haired king of the cold country. They were to supply milk and meat along the way.

Besides the supplies for the humans, the wagons were heaped high with dried fodder for the animals. Gault, who turned out to be Hulj's first general, had Barayun helping him because there was a scarcity of men who could tally and compute. They were everywhere, watching every operation to make sure supplies were properly assorted and loaded. Gault was doubtful about the mammoths. "I've never taken them through barren country before," he said, scowling at a wagon that was being fitted with its harness, "You've never observed them? They're the laziest loafers you've ever seen. Hitch them to a load a goat could pull, and they moan and sag and make pitiful eyes. Be an hour late feeding, and they take on as if they were about to drop from starvation. Let them eat a handful too much, and they swell up and puff and grunt and break wind and look at you as if you were to blame for it all." He spat and stared toward a corral where a number of the shaggy monsters were lined up along the fence, watching the activity. "There's only one thing in the world they're good for, beside scaring savages who've never seen them before; and that is, that riding lends a man a certain dignity."

BARAYUN'S judgment of the beasts was less unfavorable, though they did protest out of all proportion to the work. The one he and Gault rode was named Drooi, and though he was a monster bull, the immediate leader of any herd he met, he was gentle and even affectionate. He'd carried Gault in many a desperate battle, and Gault's marvelous cursing could not disguise the bond between them.

The riding-harness went over the back behind the hump, and over the neck, and between the forelegs. Straps on each side of the hump were supposed to keep the harness from slipping sideways. The seats hung on each side, high enough so a man could see over the hump. Barayun tilted and bumped and nearly fell off with every step, since he was right against the shoulder. After a while, watching others, he learned to put one foot or the other in a certain leather ring of the harness and move himself slightly in time with the beast's stride. Also, it was better to

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kneel in the seat, or straddle it, part of the time to avoid cramped muscles. Gault grinned at his discomfort.

This first sixth of the army was leading off and the others were to follow at intervals of a day so that the camp sites would not be overcrowded. Hulj and the young woman were leading the second. The others were under four of Gault's captains, with his second-in-command leading the last to round up stragglers.

Gault was not happy at Hulj's coming along. "You understand," he said, glancing around to make sure he was not overheard, "my lord is the finest ruler in the world, and a great fighter in his day, and I have nothing but the highest respect and affection for him. All the same, I'd just as soon he stayed home and kept some of the women happy, if he's still able at all, and kept an eye on Renne, and made sure supply caches were prepared for the return trip. He's getting a little stiff in the joints and it's a chore to watch over him in battle. I'd rather be free for directing a fight, and perhaps to make a few private investigations into the color of the enemy's blood."

"He seems to be able to keep one woman happy," Barayun said. "At least, he brought her along." He tried to keep his voice casual.

Gault looked at him quickly, then grinned. "You thought she was a consort? I saw you making ram's eyes at her. Curb yourself, my friend; that is the princess Dalna."

"Princess—." said Barayun, trying to avert his face so Gault couldn't see how red it was. "His daughter? I only glanced at her."

"Aye," said Gault, "I too only glance at her, and I see the same things you do. She is not for you nor me, red-haired one. Put such thoughts aside. We have plenty of wenches along; and if you are too bashful to approach one for yourself, I can—."

Barayun whirled toward him, furious, and choked as he saw the grin. He turned away and they rode in silence for a while, except that Gault mumbled girl's names just loud enough to hear, as he turned to stare pointedly at the part of the column where the women marched.

THE land, as they went north, showed the calamitous effects of the change in climate. Though this was spring, snow still lay heavy wherever there was shade, and even in many hollows and ravines where the slanting sun hit. Raw gullies scored the slopes, and everywhere were drifts of grass and small shrubs washed loose by the torrents. Even the stands of pine on the hillsides were not immune. There were uptorn roots and ugly scars in the

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earth. Mud was everywhere.

Gault saw him looking, and said, "If my king were not so stubborn, the capitol would have been moved south years ago. Renne has been agitating to move it. In my grandfather's time, so it is said, these hills bloomed like a garden. Now most of the animals have fled; even the birds."

"I don't understand," Barayun said, "why your climate should be so cold when the rest of the world seems to be warming up. Is the wind mainly from the north?"

"Nay; and that is another change. The old records speak of north winds; now it is always from the east, or nearly so."

"What kind of land lies to the east?"

"You could journey to the north and east for half a year and find it always cold and barren. The land reaches far to the north there; some say to the end of the earth; though my uncle told me he found a sea there which may be sailed in summer. Think you it is the wind blowing across those lands that brings us the cold?"

"It may be," said Barayun. He'd already noticed a steady wind, not strong but chill, on his right cheek. "This Demon," he said, "have you direct knowledge of him yourself?"

"Direct? Aye." Gault pulled up his left sleeve and showed a bad scar on his forearm. "Is this direct enough? It spat our spear-points back at us, molten, and I was not attentive enough."

Barayun tried to assimilate that. He didn't want to offend Gault. He waited, and Gault went on, "I led the first expedition against it twelve years ago. That was when I got this. An eldritch fight it was! Imagine hurling a spear, and having the shaft burnt off and the head sent back at you molten! It was enough to . . ."

Barayun did not think Gault was a man to imagine things. He wondered if the expedition had fought some big unknown animal in the north, and had simultaneously gotten tangled up with a volcano. To avoid seeming to doubt Gault, he lifted his crossbow, in which Gault had already shown great interest. "I'll look forward to trying this. My bolts are of iron, which according to legend is particularly distasteful to demons and such."

Gault shrugged. "We shall see. Though, as I hear it, that metal must be made even hotter than bronze to become molten. Molten bronze coming back at me is hot enough." He rode silently for a while. "I doubt much we shall get to fight the thing."

"Why say you that?"

"We did get spears and arrows into it the first time, but on the second expedition, five years past,

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it fled before us so fast and far we did not find it again that year. It has been located since, but I think it may prefer again to avoid a fight. Though I would not swear with a knife at my manhood that we were not a bedraggled victor the first time, and the Demon little hurt."

THE first night's camp was in a meadow with a stream along one side and a growth of pines along the other. The deer browsed on what grass was not drowned out. The mammoths ate pine foliage. They were well trained; instead of merely dispersing along the trees, they went in a line, each breaking off a good-sized branch or the top of a small tree and bringing it to the camp-site. More than one trip was made, to build an oblong enclosure of pine branches around the camp. The women picked the best spots, covered the mud with pine boughs, pitched tents, and got fires started. The mammoths, their work done, lined the inside of the enclosure with much trumpeting and rumbling and a few squabbles among themselves, and began to eat.

By nightfall men and animals were fed, and the deer were driven into one end of the enclosure. The mammoths were persuaded to lie down. A few resisted and were left standing, but most of them squirmed themselves into a nearly-solid rampart and became quiet.

When he'd finished the meal of deer meat, milk, unleavened bread and greens from along the brooklet, Barayun went with Gault to inspect the camp. Some of the men had wives along, and there were a few stripling boys to learn the ways. There were no children or young girls. The unmarried women made what arrangements suited them.

Neither the yellow men nor the black ones had brought any women, so they did their own cooking and other chores. The former were relatively quiet, gambling and talking in restrained gibble-gabble around their fires. The black men had their own forms of gambling, but many of them worked at their weapons while groups around each fire had their chants going. A good many of the black men took off their fur garments and tried to find sleeping-positions that wouldn't fry them on one side and freeze them on the other. Barayun was a little tired of the furs too, but he stayed in them.

The only sentries were a few of the mammoth-handlers. Gault said the beasts themselves were light sleepers, and would give warning if so much as a rabbit came near the camp.

The handlers had no sleeping-tents, and Barayun had been wondering where he would sleep,

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since he seemed technically to belong to that group, being a rider. Now he learned. The handlers not on guard crawled into spots among the great bodies.

Barayun, with a vivid image of Drooi rolling on him, hesitated. Drooi was lying with his belly toward the center of the enclosure, his head resting on the hind legs of another mammoth. His legs were stretched out along the ground. Barayun decided if he curled up against the belly he'd have warning enough. The brute could hardly roll on him without first gathering in its legs.

Gault grinned, and kept grinning. Even after it was too dark to see him, Barayun could feel his merriment. Finally Gault said, with profound regret in his voice, "Merry as it would be, I have not the heart. Come up here closer to me, red-hair."

Barayun sat erect. "Why?"

"Otherwise you may awake in a pool of urine."

"Oh," said Barayun. He got up, glad the darkness hid his face as the nearest handlers chortled. There was room close to the front legs. Gault was actually between them; evidently the upper didn't touch the lower. The end of Drooi's trunk felt of Barayun, then went back against Gault.

It was snug in the long wool below the chest, and not uncomfortable once Barayun got used to the ponderous breathing. It was like the motion of a boat on mild seas. Drooi was not the least odorous thing he'd ever encountered, but there were enough other smells about so it didn't make much difference.

HULJ'S Capitol was on the river Obeh, which, according to Barayun's knowledge of this part of the world, had its sources far to the south near the land of the yellow men. Barayun had followed up it himself for two days, after reaching it in company with some horse-nomads who were loose subjects of Hulj. Now they were paralleling it through fairly high but not hilly country. Many days to the north, Gault said, it emptied into a gulf which ran far down from the northern sea.

Before they'd gone more than a fraction of the way, they were out of the pines and on monotonous lands, nearly flat, where only grasses and shrubs grew, and those sparsely. Spring was turning the frozen ground into mud, and the column picked its way painfully with many a backtrack and detour. The wind from the east scoured across the barrens, offsetting the warmth of the sun, which was out most of the time.

They were looking for the trail of supply trains which had established caches of food and fod-

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der somewhere ahead. Until they found them, they'd have to live from the wagons. The mammoths were vocal about being on rations.

Four days after they'd seen the last tree, they met one of the trains coming back. There were about fifty mammoths, each drawing a nearly-empty wagon; two handlers for each mammoth; a dozen warriors; and less than twenty deer herded by several striplings and one old man. Gault hailed the warrior in charge. "What delayed you? No doubt you wasted a week at the cache, gambling and inventing pastimes that no decent man would want to guess at."

The man scowled. "We tarried a single day. The beasts were exhausted, and the trail—."

"Save your excuses for someone more gullible," Gault said. "How lies the trail? Can we reach the place by nightfall?"

The man shook his head. "Not in this cursed mud. We started with the first light."

Gault glanced at the sun, which was perhaps a third of the way through the afternoon. "We will make camp soon, then. Saw you a likely spot?"

"None I would choose if I had hopes of finding better. There is a bluff you can reach before sundown, the lea of which did not look too muddy." He looked toward the column's half-empty wagons. "Can you spare us anything? By my reckoning, we are five days from fodder."

"Four," said Gault, "without dawdling. I can let you have two, if you have not eaten the cache bare while disporting. There are five columns behind me. Each may spare you a little. I would advise you to avoid the one next behind, though; Hulj is leading, and there was some talk of beheading loafers."

"The cache is ample," the man scowled, "and if you or the king wish to trade jobs with me, I will gladly take over your snug billets."

Gault chuckled and sent two of his handlers to exchange wagons. There were a few sick marchers who would turn back with the train, and three of the warriors from the train wanted to go north with Gault.

They found the bluff, which ran north and south, giving a little shelter from the wind. The fires were very scanty for lack of fuel. This was the fourth night without decent fires, and the black men were in low spirits. Gault took Barayun to talk to them.

Their leaders were delighted that Barayun understood their tongue. "If we could only have a little fuel each night," the spokesman said, "we could take off these animal skins for a while and become men again."

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Barayun translated, and Gault gave a snort. "What kind of warriors are they?" he demanded, after some preliminary obscenities. "Can they not stand being clothed? Look at the yellow ones. They are so uncomplaining one would think each had a small invisible wench inside his clothing with him."

"The yellow-skinned ones are accustomed to cold, and they are wearing their own garments," Barayun said. "It is not so with these. They are in a climate very unlike their own, and animal skins have significance for them. Were you not uncomfortable when you travelled in hot climes?"

Gault spat. "Aye. But ask him what he thinks we are going to burn."

"They speak of the dung of the mammoths. Dried in the sun —."

Gault roared with laughter. Finally, he said, "All right. If they want to gather it up and carry it themselves, I won't object. Perchance its smell will be improved, or at least novel. Whatever wood we may find they can cut and carry too; but it will have to be on their own backs. I will not burden down the wagons with such nonsense. At least, not more than a very little."

THE mammoths were formed into two lines, not far apart, in order to use the shelter of the bluff. The camp finished its chores and settled down.

The days were longer now; the sun circling low in the sky and dipping only for a short time below the northern horizon to leave a dim twilight. It was in this peculiar dusk that Barayun snapped suddenly awake with the feel of something wrong. The sentries were crouched close to the mammoths, not talking. The big beasts were stirring uneasily. All attention was directed to the top of the bluff.

As Barayun's eyes focussed he saw a bulky light-gray shape there, forty or fifty feet down the line. He recognized it as a giant bear. Its head was lowered in scrutiny of the camp. It began to pace along the edge of the bluff in Barayun's direction. The mammoths made nervous sounds.

Barayun felt for his crossbow and began cranking it up. Gault, who was just crawling from his sleeping-place, put out a hand as if to restrain him, then drew it back.

The bear paused directly above them and seemed to be staring into Barayun's eyes.

If he'd been fully awake, Barayun might have reasoned that this was not a creature to attack mammoths. As it was, he raised the bow hastily and loosed the bolt. Even before it took the bear

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squarely in the chest, he realized he'd done a very foolish thing.

The bear screamed mortally and collapsed, to come sliding and writhing down the bluff. The line of mammoths heaved up like a giant surf. Gault came scuttling clear just as Drooi got his legs beneath him, with amazing agility for such a big animal. Gault grabbed Barayun and shoved him forward. "Mount! Mount!"

Barayun grabbed for the harness and hauled himself up just in time to avoid being crushed between Drooi and another beast. He had an awful moment of fear that Gault had gotten trapped, but as soon as the other mammoth lurched away, Gault came bounding from beneath Drooi.

The camp was a shambles now. Mammoths, shrilling their panic, were up and stampeding. People screamed. The deer broke free or were trampled. There was a jarring impact as Drooi blundered into a wagon. Drooi stumbled, caught his stride, and went on. Gault was pounding him behind the ear and shouting into it. Barayun, clinging where he could, bounced like another bit of harness. He would never again think of mammoths as slow animals. The night was full of sound now; the trumpeting and thunder of giant feet, yells of handlers, and the screams of hurt men and women falling behind.

SUDDENLY Drooi set his legs and slid to a stop. He stood, great flanks heaving.

Gault said, "Call! Call them in, Drooi!"

Drooi lifted his trunk and blew a shrill note. He sucked in air and blew another. Around them in the half-dark, other beasts answered.

Things began to quiet. Slowly, Drooi started back toward the camp. Barayun shook with the cold and with reaction. As they neared camp he could hear groans, and the sobbing of women. They passed a wagon, three of its wheels knocked off; another with its side shattered.

Gault shouted orders, and men began rallying to him. "Get fires burning!" he said, "Chop up the wagons that are worst damaged! Handlers! Find your beasts and follow the deer!"

The fires showed bodies, some of them awfully crushed. Several mammoths lay whimpering with broken limbs. At least a score of deer lay around the site, dead or dying. Ten or more of the wagons had been knocked about, some crushing men who'd been sleeping under them.

They rode to look at the bear. Its blood made a pool and stained the light-gray fur.

Men began trudging in from the darkness. After a while the first deer were herded back. They, and mammoths in ones and twos,

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kept straggling in until after sunup.

Gault rode Drooi around the camp, looking things over. "Odin!" he said, "It will take a day to clean this mess up and get ready to travel. The worst of it is, Hulj will be upon us before we can move."

Barayun's shame boiled over. "Better you had not told me to mount," he said, "better I had died."

Gault looked at him with mixed expressions. At last he said, 'It was a foolish thing, but I cannot let you take all the blame. I could have stayed your shot. But I was curious to see that weapon used."

WHEN Hulj arrived, in the middle of the afternoon, he already had the story from some straggler. His anger was cold. He addressed Dalna rather than Barayun. "Such you have to look forward to as a ruler, my dear. A hundred men and women trampled; not less than a dozen mammoths lost, plus a good third of the deer. All through the stupidity of one man, and a foreigner, at that." Later, Barayun learned, Gault had to talk long to get permission to keep Barayun with the column.

Despite his vow, Gault let wood from the splintered wagons be loaded on the good ones, though he made a great display of requiring the black men to carry token amounts. Hulj transferred part of his column to make up the losses. He in turn would replenish from the column behind; thus the delay would be minimized and the final weakness left in the last column, where it belonged.

They reached the cache near noon of the following day and found a few starving wild deer trying to get at the fodder. These were recruited into the herd. Resupplied, the column went on. They camped in the open, so the fires were welcome.

Toward the end of the following day Gault said, "Heard you the wolves last night?"

"Aye," said Barayun.

"They are desperate with starvation. A herder was attacked yesterday, and would have been killed had not mammoths been ridden to his rescue. I must organize a hunt and teach them respect."

The hunt took place at the next (and last) cache. Three dozen mammoths, each mounting four men and followed by half a dozen more, dispersed into the ravines around a small sink. When they were hidden a herd of deer was driven by and a few of them, who showed signs of internal injuries anyway, were left as bait.

Packs of wolves followed the herd, and now they closed in on the prey. Barayun counted nearly fifty; huge creatures with bodies as long as a man. One pack quick-

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ly pulled down a deer and fought over it, while others harrassed the remaining prey.

Now Gault urged Drooi out of hiding. Two yellow men, quiet as always, rode behind Gault and Barayun. Five of the black warriors, with two of Gault's own to instruct them, followed on foot.

The wolves saw the trap and raced around the closing circle of mammoths, seeking a way out. Spearmen shouted and threw stones to keep them from the gaps. As the circle narrowed, the warriors stretched out to fill the gaps. At that point the wolves, as if obeying a common leader, drew together in a single pack, near the center of the circle.

Hulj and Dalna were mounted at Drooi's left, with some more of the black men so the king could observe them in action.

Now the range was short enough, and arrows began to fly. One of the beasts yelped and darted from the pack with a shaft in its ribs. The rain of arrows increased. More wolves were hit, and they scattered.

THEY formed again quickly, on the run this time, and raced for a spot around the circle from Drooi. Gault was shooting now but Barayun, bow cocked, was waiting for a closer target. The two yellow men were shooting very fast, whipping arrows from their quivvers and not pulling their oddly-shaped bows hard, but hard enough. Their broad faces split with grins and they uttered little cries of glee.

The holocaust was too much for the wolves. They swerved in a body and streaked back toward the center. As the arrows followed them, they made a brief stand, heads lowered. Then, with an air of desperation, they came straight for Hulj's mammoth.

Barayun let his bolt go. It disappeared somewhere in the pack. He grabbed for another as he frantically cranked the bow. Spears began to fly from both sides, but this time the pack did not waver, though gray bodies writhed in its wake.

The mammoths were closing in sideways to narrow the gap ahead of the wolves. A sudden lurch of Drooi knocked Barayun off balance. He grabbed frantically, missed the handhold, and tumbled to the ground. The wolves were only yards away now, and their eyes fixed on him. He knew in that instant that they would not pass him without revenge.

He jumped to his feet and raised the bow. Something whipped around his waist, crushing the breath from him, and he was jerked high out of danger. Drooi's great trunk held him aloft, gasping and squirming, as the black men took the charge, spears firm.

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Arrows rained on the wolves, but a desperate core of them hurtled at the black men. There were not enough spears for them all, and they tangled in a snarling, yelling chaos with the warriors. Barayun saw Dalna send an arrow into a beast that had a man by the arm.

It was over before Barayun could realize that he still held his bow, cocked and loaded, and that both arms were free. A handful of wolves broke clear and streaked away. He raised the bow and sent a futile bolt after them.

There was a roar of laughter at the belated shot. Even Gault joined in. But bitterest of all was Dalna's full-throated laugh, hearty as a man's.

Drooi put him down, face flaming, where he could clamber to his seat. He would gladly have changed places with one of the dead wolves.

SOMETIMES there were cold rains now, and once or twice snow. There was no trail. They followed the river, as nearly as mud would let them. Every side-ravine became a barrier. The supplies dwindled. Gault transferred loads from some of them, removed the wheels, and they became barges to float north along the river, which would have no more rapids. The weakest marchers were chosen to go.

Hulj's column had dropped back now. Barayun applied himself grimly to the work of trail-breaking, learning how to handle the mammoths and keep the wagons rolling, sledding, or floating. As more wagons emptied, a contingent was sent down-river to try the fishing and wait somewhere with the catch. Sometimes they spent a whole day searching for the rare patches of grass, without making any headway north. The rations had been nil for several days when they found the fishing party. The catch was good, but it carried them to the shore of the gulf, where they found the groups they'd sent down the river.

The seaport, Gault said, was to the east, beyond the mouth of the river, where a range of mountains turned aside the east wind. Even here it was warmer, and with plenty of drain-off the mud was not as bad. There was enough grazing for the animals if they did not have to do much else.

Three days passed, and Hulj's column still did not arrive. Gault sent scouts out looking for it, but said in any case it was time to move again. Now Barayun learned the real reason for the wagon's peculiar and very heavy construction. Each floated a mammoth.

Getting them afloat was a fascinating procedure. A wagon was rolled out to the right depth, then

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a mammoth went aboard via heavy planks. At first he stayed at the rear, so the front end of the wagon rode high. The front wheels were taken off. Then he moved forward so the aft end rose, and those wheels were removed. Then he positioned himself in the middle. The wagonbed being a shallow dish-shape, the resulting barge was stable so long as the water was smooth, there were no leaks, and the mammoth stayed put. Quite a number of the beasts capsized their craft, but they were quite at home, even playful, in the water, and it only had to be done over again.

Hulj came in on the fifth day, having had to swerve from Gault's trail because of a new mudslide. By that time ships were arriving from the seaport, and some bigger true barges, along with food and fodder. The remaining columns came in, in various stages of starvation but largely intact.

Gault said the time they'd made wasn't bad. Still, they'd have to hustle if they weren't to get caught in the north for the winter. The seaport was the only self-sufficient settlement near here, and it was far from big enough to support the whole expedition.

IN the port, Barayun could at last shed the furs. There was only a mild warm breeze, off a blue sea that might have been thousands of miles south. The sky was exceptionally clear, and an odd purple-blue. The blinding sun cast crisp shadows. During the brief twilight, the stars were brilliant points. Some of Aleyn's scientists vowed those were other suns, far remoter than the earth's own. At least two of them—Barayun thought they were of the 'wanderers', whose eccentric motions were the basis of even wilder theories—could be seen during the day.

Gault took it upon himself to invite Barayun to the first conference at the port. Present besides Gault, Hulj and Dalna, was a tanned man named Birk who was possibly even older than Hulj. He commanded all the Sibyr fleets.

Hulj spoke to him first. "Good Birk, you have had time to assess the problems of transport. How soon can you land us near the Demon?"

"The first tenth, including two dozen mammoths, in eight days' time, my lord. The rest will require four times as long."

"What of food and fodder? Is enough stored up?"

"Hardly, sire. I would say we should step up the hunting and fishing, and the gathering of fodder as well. No one expected an expedition of such size."

"Have you the men to handle it?"

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"I could use a few mammoths for boar hunts."

"Gault will give you what you need, along with huntsmen if you have not enough. I want meats, well cooked and wrapped against a long campaign, to start moving in large amounts. Greens must be gathered; the kind that prevent the skinsores. Of the deer we brought, you may slaughter most of the stags, but the cows must be kept for milk and for young. Plan that we may encounter delays and mishaps. What of the Demon? Has the watch been kept?"

"Day and night, my lord. It grows, but it has not moved."

"Think you it knows of your presence?"

"If so, it gives no sign."

"We will assume it does. What of the smoke?"

"It breathes out more each day."

Hulj fixed his eyes on Barayun. "Have you been convinced?"

"I did not doubt your word, sire; but I still have no conception of the thing's nature."

"That you will have. Scribe a report to your king, or to this council you speak of, and I will send it by galley. It may be they will send a fleet, at least."

Barayun hesitated. "Had I best not delay until I have seen it, that I may make a description?"

Hulj's eyes flashed. "You can scribe a second! Do you think me too destitute to send more than one galley? Or that I cannot find more than one bit of goat-skin to scribe on?"

Barayun turned red. "I would not speculate on how much goat-skin you have, sire. I will scribe at once." Dalna giggled, but Hulj did not smile.

Hulj turned to Birk again. "Have you found other harbors near the spot?"

"Two good ones, my lord; but both are several days' march from the Demon."

"Find three more. They need not be the best, nor close to the Demon. I want a strong position on the island."

"Yes, my king."

"All of us here," said Hulj, "will sail at once by your fastest vessel. You have others along the way to pass messages?"

"Of course, my lord."

THE ship was as well-fitted as any of Aleyn's own, with a stout must lateen-rigged and two banks of oars. Hulj, Dalna, and their handservants occupied the forward cabins. Gault and Barayun had one beside Birk's, aft and below that of the ship's captain, who needed the best view.

On the gulf the east wind struck them, helping little with their northing. The gulf was so wide that, from the middle, neither shore could be seen without climbing the mast. Gault

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said they'd be five days reaching the mouth; after that it would be easy sailing to the northwest to the tip of a very long island. The Demon had fled there from the second expedition.

On the second day Barayun was summoned forward to discuss with Hulj and Birk how the compass worked. Hulj said, "Clearly, the needle points to the Demon. How is it that Aleyn's sorcerers could put such a spell on it, if you did not even know of the Demon?"

Barayun decided to be frank. "These were not made by sorcery, sire, but simply by rubbing the needles on a kind of dark stone which is in some way a relative of iron. It is only in the last two generations we have known how to make them. We have thought there might be a great mass of this stone in the north, sufficient to attract the needles even far away."

Hulj restrained a smile. "A clever thought, if eldritch. What think you now?"

Barayun had a second compass, which he drew from his clothing. He compared it with Hulj's. "I do not know what to think, sire. As you can see, they both point in the same direction."

"The direction of the Demon exactly," said Birk.

"It is true," Barayun said, "that as we have come north the needles point more to the west. I wish I had been there when the Demon retreated, to see whether the needles turned to follow."

Hulj shook his head in wonder. "How valiantly you cling to your doubt. Is it possible the sorcerers worked this charm by accident? Or have they deceived the rest of you?"

Barayun could not help sighing. "No, my lord. They were not sorcerers, but artisans. I myself have watched the needles rubbed on the black stone."

Hulj grunted. "Whatever you call it, it is sorcery. Why would they do it at all, if they knew not of the Demon?"

"We use it as an aid to navigation," Barayun said. "When the stars are hidden, we follow one of these."

The sea-commander's old face twitched. "Exactly as I said," he reminded Hulj, "I could ignore all else, and follow this device straight to the Demon."

Hulj smiled. "I would like to see the faces of Aleyn's seamen, should the Demon decided to move to the other end of the world."

THE next day Barayun tried to teach Hulj, Dalna, Gault and Birk some of Aleyn's theories. He started by describing the world as round like an apple.

Birk snorted. "If that were so, all the water would run off it. Any fool can see that. Obviously it

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must not only be flat, but a little dish-shaped to hold the water on. I have often thought about it."

"There is a force," Barayun said, "which pulls the water, and all else, toward the center. Hence it cannot run off."

"Indeed?" smiled Birk, "I might believe that had I never seen a river, nor sailed one. All of them run along the surface of the land; some in one direction, some in another; but all toward the sea. Quite obviously they are not attracted straight down, as would be the case if your notion were true, but toward the sea. What is more natural than a river wanting to join the sea? Both are water, and like draws like."

"We have heard such frivolry before," Hulj added, "Also that the earth circles the sun, as if tied by a string. Now aside from the fact that we see no string, it is impossible that we circle the sun; for if we did we should sometimes see its thin edge, and even its back. We do not. Therefore it is clear that the sun circles the earth, keeping its face turned toward us as the gods decreed."

Barayun sighed. "No doubt you are right, sire. I will surely not complain at such a benevolent arrangement by the gods."

Dalna giggled.

THEY emerged into a sea as warm and deeply blue as the gulf. Now there was no night at all. They turned west around a headland, rocky and with little vegetation except in a few gorges. Wind bellied out the sail. The oarsmen shipped their oars and spent the time gambling and comparing lies. The fishing was good. There were a few sea-birds about the cliffs, but no sign of land animals.

They met small galleys with reports, and on the second day they overhauled a slow barge laden with supplies. They went alongside to take aboard food, and there was time enough for Gault and Barayun, as well as some of the men, to have a swim. It was a pleasant, relaxed time.

He saw no more of Hulj nor Dalna except a glimpse now and then, as he had no business forward and the sail blocked the view except when he climbed aloft.

On what corresponded to the evening of the third day the captain decided to make more northing, and the oars came out again. When they were shipped once more, Barayun could see a smudge, due west as far as he could determine, on the horizon. It was not a cloud, but rather like smoke from a tremendous fire.

Presently they sighted a hull which proved to be a small galley beating north and south to help incoming ships find their way.

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The compass had brought them in perfectly.

THEY eased under oar into a fjord. Inside, it widened a little and ran inland, vanishing around a turn. The walls were too steep for landing here; there were no beaches, which was not surprising considering the rise of the sea.

It was not until the sun had moved almost due ahead of them, behind the high cliffs, that they reached a splitting of the fjord and turned into a canyon rising to the north. They were in dense shadow now. Where the salt water ended, a landing had been hewed out and there were tents and a few galleys. Two dozen men and a few women watched idly as they moored, then jumped to startled attention as Hulj showed himself.

Birk hounded the idlers about, clearing the king's quarters. They'd been built on a ledge a way up the canyon. They were mammoth-hide lodges, crude enough but evidently comfortable, for the women of the garrison had usurped them and now had to be shooed out like scared chickens. Hulj impatiently waved away their apologies. He, Dalna, and the retainers went up the ladder that was the only access. Two men hauled the ladder up behind, though from what Barayun had seen Hulj had nothing to fear from his subjects.

Birk, with quarters below the ledge, took the ship's captain in with him. Barayun lodged with Gault. Their shelter consisted of mammoth-hides draped over some boulders, with a fire at the entrance. There were hides for sleeping, some vessels of water and one of mead, and some dried meat.

The soldiers and oarsmen who'd come along were building fires and rigging quarters for themselves near the ships. A ration of mead was being doled out to them. There was of course a bad shortage of women, which was reflected in their smug smiles. The bidding would be brisk.

WHEN they had slept, Gault took Barayun and six men up the canyon. A trail of sorts had been chopped out. In two hours they reached the top, and walked a short way north to a lookout station among some rocks on a low hill. Gault peered to the north, grinned, and took Barayun's arm. "There, doubter!"

Between them and snowy peaks some miles to the north was a considerable hollow. In its center was a vast black sphere mounted on top of a white-hot stem, or so it looked. Barayun's first thought was of an incredible toadstool. But what toadstool was ever an

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arrow-cast across and breathed out at the top a tremendous pillar of smoke? That was the smudge they'd seen. It rose straight up a short way, then the wind swept it westward, rising and spreading, until it besmudged the whole horizon.

"Odin!" said Gault, in awe, "It's grown by twice!"

Now that he studied the immense globe, Barayun could see that it was not solid, but composed of some thin stuff that shimmered and eddied as it mounted up, from the fiery stem, around the great curve, to the top. There it seemed to become the smoke itself. Dimly, he could see into it, where the stem, like an unimaginably huge white-hot rod of iron, ended at the center. He saw now that the mantle's color was not all black. At the bottom, where it came into view, it glowed faintly as if hot. Then it was black or dark gray until it neared the top, when it turned into a deep red or purple. An idea struck him. "This," he exclaimed, "is the source of the red rains!"

Gault looked at him. "I see no red, friend."

"Let it fall with rain or snow, and it'll look red enough, allowing for reasonable exaggeration. This is how iron behaves, when burnt. There is a black kind of corruption, which is the stuff that attracts needles of iron after they are rubbed on a chunk of it. There is another kind of corruption, red or brown, that comes without burning if iron is exposed to the weather without being well greased. This creature is eating a pillar of iron and breathing out the corruption!"

Gault looked at him as if he were mad. "A pillar of iron? That?"

"Aye; I'll wager! Though in what devil's forge it be wrought, to be drawn up thus from the ground, I do not care to guess."

"Better speak of Demons," said Gault, shaking his head, "it will make more sense to me. Though, your notion would fit our last encounter with it. Fleeing, it left this black sphere to collapse like an empty cloak; and the pillar of fire, too. That collapsed to the earth and seemed to be the cause of earthquakes and volcanos. If you are right, then what we see may only be its head, or its leaves. The main part may be under the ground. Think you so?"

Barayun shrugged. He drew out his compass. The needle trembled violently and seemed to want to tilt downward. He tilted the case. The needle indeed wanted to point straight into the ground. "When will we be ready to attack it?"

"By my reckoning," said Gault, "never. But Hulj decrees, and everyone knows that kings are blessed with second sight and

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touches of godhood; along with certain oddities I am too loyal to mention. In any case, yon is a glorious enemy, is it not? At the worst, our names shall be heard in the mead-houses."

WITH Hulj here, things moved. A galley went up the fjord to find a suitable landing-place for mammoths. Fishing and salting-down kept the women busy, and squads of warriors went out after game. It turned out that the island, as far south as they had explored, was not barren but bore much low growth that mammoths and deer could eat, and which supported a population of white rabbits, wolves, foxes, bears, small rodents, and ground birds.

The army began arriving, here and at the other ports, and encampments grew around the strange creature's hollow. Barges brought in supplies. The first mammoths arrived and were moved to where they could forage. Lines of support and supply were built up, and a network of paths. Deer were grazed farther south where they'd be out of the way.

When Drooi arrived, Gault and Barayun rode west across the island to inspect the landings on the other side. It was a three days' trip each way, though they pushed on for long hours, Drooi registering complaints for the record though he didn't seem to tire, and making a great show of martyrdom at having to carry his own food part of the way. Except for broken mountains along the coast and a few peaks inland —such as the snowy ones to the north—the island was fairly level. There wasn't even much mud.

On the return trip they circled the hollow and viewed the creature from different outposts. It had a sobering effect on the warriors stationed around it, but morale was good.

It was well past mid-summer when Hulj decided things were ready.

BARAYUN was privileged to sit in the councils.

Gault was for hurling all at one blow. Hulj and Birk thought it better to make a small probe, in case there were any surprises. Gault argued, "It surely knows we are here, and will recognize a small sortie. Why waste time?" He turned to Barayun. "What think you?"

Barayun hesitated under Hulj's frown. "I do not think the mammoths should be shown," he said, "since that is your only new weapon."

"Of course not," Hulj said impatiently, "It will be an attack on foot only. Possibly from three sides, to test its alertness."

"So be it," said Gault. "I will include a few of the foreign war-

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riors, to test their mettle."

"I would like to go," Barayun said.

"Why?" demanded Hulj, "Can you not observe from an outpost?"

"I would prefer a close look, my lord."

For the first time, Dalna spoke directly to Barayun. "Clumsy courage is worse than clever cowardice." Her eyes were mischievous.

Barayun flushed. "I thank my lady for granting me courage. I would not like to be both a coward and a fool."

Gault grinned, but Hulj looked impatient. "Do as you wish; but keep out of the way."

FROM three points, platoons of two dozen men each marched into the hollow. Gault and Barayun were with one; so were six yellow men and six black men. They converged on the creature without visible reaction.

There was such heat from the thing they went no closer than half an arrow-cast. The dark globe hung over them like a devil's cloud. This close, it was all the more clear that the dark wall consisted of a dark mist or a very fine powder held somehow in place, with an over-all upward motion. He could not see much beyond the middle, from down here, but he could see the under part, which was white-hot as it burbled out around the fiery stem. The stem itself seemed to be the main source of heat, and was almost too dazzling to look at. It was ten feet or more through, and fifty from the ground up to the globe. He heard the murmured awe of the warriors, but no one bolted.

Gault raised his hand and brought it down.

The first volley of arrows went up at a high angle. The second, aimed lower, was in the air before the first hit. Barayun did not release his bolt, preferring to watch first the effect of the bronze arrow-tips.

Before each arrow the dark surface seemed to yield, not more than half the length of the shaft. It was like a waterbag poked with a finger. Immediately, the shafts were aflame, sometimes audibly. The darkness swirled around each indentation. A moment, and each tip popped out, molten and glowing.

One of the soldiers turned to run. Gault, standing not far from the spot, roared oaths and raised his own bow. The warrior stopped and got back into line. Some of the others flinched, but stood their ground, shields raised. One of them yelped and slapped at his thigh. Barayun, with no shield, was happy to see that nearly all of the molten bronze fell short of the men.

Gault signaled again, and the

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third flight of arrows went winging toward the stem just below its entry into the globe. The shafts exploded into flame. The bronze heads vanished, with only flashes of green to mark them, and did not come back out.

"What think you?" said Gault to Barayun.

Barayun shrugged. "I think we have no more effect than gnats."

"True. But a sufficient swarm of gnats. . . ." Gault shouted to his captains to march the men away.

"A moment," Barayun said. He waited until the men were clear, then raised the crossbow.

The bolt was a disappointment. It went into the sphere with only a tiny swirl, and did not come out. They waited a while, then Gault said, "I see no signs of death in the thing. It is more as if it had swallowed a sweet tidbit."

Barayun nodded, and they left.

IT had not been clear to Barayun what mammoths were expected to accomplish, but when he saw the formation that moved into the hollow his interest picked up.

They formed a circle around the thing, half an arrow-cast distant, spacing themselves so the soldiers could take cover under and behind them. Each beast was shielded by big pads of leather, so that all but their eyes were protected as long as they faced forward. The leather was wet, and each animal carried waterbags so it could be kept wet down. Two handlers rode behind upright shields of thick leather. Quivvers of arrows hung from the hairy flanks.

A second circle of the beasts, with its own horde of bowmen, trudged into place twenty yards behind the first. There were enough mammoths for the two concentric circles plus nearly three hundred in reserve. Some of the latter were busy hauling up supplies. Only about half the total armies were in the attack, the rest being either garrisoned near the landings for quick escape, or in protected spots nearer the hollow. It was clear that Hulj was prepared for almost anything; that he and Gault knew how to handle armies.

It took half the morning to get everything in place. Now Gault and Barayun, on Drooi, rode from one of the outposts to watch from closer up. Hulj and Dalna stayed closer to shelter.

Gault stopped Drooi, who kept shifting his feet in a little dance of impatience and making snorting sounds. All the mammoths seemed aroused, not with fright but with something like battle-fever. There was no trumpeting nor breaking of formation.

Gault raised his horn and blew the signal.

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The coordination was amazing. Platoon captains began to call their commands in quick cadence, somehow timing things so that there was no lag between the near and far sides of the circles. All around the two arcs, bows bent and lifted, the sun flashing on the polished wood. Then the shafts went winging. The two rings of arrows kept their spacing all the way to the target, in an instant of strange beauty like ripples on a pond converging in reverse toward their source. They plowed into the dark curtain.

The rehearsed point of aim was a third of the way up the sphere. Almost as the first struck, two more flights were under way. A bright band flared around the sphere. Barayun realized it was molten bronze. It seemed to constrict inward for an instant, then it exploded outward. A boiling sound accompanied it. As before, most of the metal fell short, but here and there a warrior cried out. One mammoth screamed and bolted from the inner circle. Others shrilled or actually turned, but did not bolt. Barayun could see that the leather armor had taken a spattering.

THE shooting stopped after a set number of arrows per man, and now the handlers shouted as they brought their beasts under control. The one that had screamed was stopped by two deftly-handled beasts of the outer circle that moved into his path. He was still screaming. Gault said, "Must have taken a hot bit in the eye." His face showed more concern than he would likely admit. He started Drooi in that direction, but the handlers had the hurt animal under control and plodding slowly uphill to shelter. He still whimpered and held his head cocked to one side.

The scars on the sphere were still visible, but growing less so as they moved up toward the top. The column of smoke wavered and thinned for an instant, then was as before.

"Look you," said Barayun, "does it not seem that the molten bronze always comes back with just less than the force with which it went?"

"Aye," said Gault, looking at him questioningly.

"Well, then; it is not wise to have two circles of attack so widely spaced. The bronze of the second one will spatter back as far as the first; or at least, on the average some of the metal will have force enough to do so. Would it not be better to have one circle farther back, and shoot at a more leisurely range?"

"I do not understand your talk of average and force, but I see your meaning. Think you the arrows would still penetrate? They would arrive more spent."

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"That does not seem to matter; and if they arrive more spent, the less the metal will come back, I think."

"We could not achieve the concentration."

"Do you not have too much now?" Even a single arrow wounds the thing, but it heals quickly after tossing it out. I can not but think the dark sphere is like a skin to the thing; or like the leaves of a tree. In either case, it might be better to wound it lightly in many places at once, rather than deeply at one spot. The wounds do not seem to be too deep in any case."

Gault thought, then nodded slowly. "Aye. You have a strange way of thinking, but not without shrewdness. If Hulj agrees, we will try that after the noon meal."

HULJ did agree, with a glance at Barayun and a raise of the eyebrows, and the animals were formed into the wider circle. New stocks of arrows were brought out, and the men got busy chopping out places to stand, since they were now up into the rocky part of the slope.

No effort at coordination was made at this range; each man began shooting on signal and placed his arrows at random on any part of the sphere. Many of the first fell short, and a few arched completely over the sphere, sometimes passing unhindered through the column of smoke. The familiar little disturbances appeared all over the sphere. The men improved their aim, and the turbulence increased. The yellow men were at the extreme of their range, arching arrows high but getting them off faster than anyone and quite precisely. As the rain of shafts thickened, the whole sphere became speckled with transparent spots. From this height Barayun could catch glimpses through it to the snowy peaks beyond.

The thing's writhing ceased to be local and became an overall shudder. Suddenly, it collapsed. A vast shout went up from the armies. Mammoths shrilled. The dark smoke that had formed the sphere swirled without confinement now, with only a general upward and spreading motion.

The men stopped shooting and began to jump around.

Then the scene cleared, and the clamor died. Solid and unmoving, a smaller sphere stood over the white-hot pillar. A few arrows, loosed in sudden rage, got a quick rejection. The sphere expanded a little, keeping its shape perfectly. The column of smoke at the top was smaller now. The sphere grew a little more, as if feeling its way, and the arrows began to take effect. It shrank back slightly and held. Now Barayun noticed that it was

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settling very slowly on the stem. That went on for half an hour. Gault did not revive the shooting, though a few arrows arched in. Finally he stopped even those. "Enough arrows wasted," he said glumly as he signalled the retreat. "We'll spend two days collecting the metal we've urinated away already, if the thing lets us." They rode in silence for a while, then, "Think you the inner globe was there all the time?"

"No," said Barayun, "for you could see through the outer one for a while. I think it formed the inner one when the attack got too hot; just as an army falls back to a new position. I think it can form its globes wherever it pleases; within certain limits, perhaps."

"Aye," said Gault. "I told you it was bigger than before. Fatter fed, perhaps. If all we can do is knock fat off it, it will outlast us."

"What's next?"

"Catapults. There'll be little metal to spare, though; we'll hurl stones."

THE next day the sphere had grown back nearly to its former size, and seemed a little higher on the stem again. It showed no reaction when squads of men went out to collect the bronze it had spat back. Some of the metal was in big flat gobs that mammoths had to haul.

After noon of the second day Gault, a grin on his face, nodded to Barayun to come along. "There's to be a little comedy," he said, "the black men want their witch doctors to have a try at it."

Barayun, who'd seen the witch doctors on their own continent, did not smile; but neither did he expect much. He was convinced by now that the creature's strength hadn't even begun to be tried.

The black men made a magnificent show, in their weird masks and costumes. The shindig began with all the black men's drums placed in an arc at a comfortable distance from the creature. The pounding and chanting began, along with a dozen varieties of war dance by different tribes. Nearly the whole of the black armies were in the hollow, chanting and shouting and brandishing weapons. From where Drooi stood, none of the drummers seemed to keep time with any of the rest.

Now the column of witch doctors came snaking from cover. They wove among the tribal klatches, screaming above the din and shaking gourds and ceremonial staffs. A cloud of dust made the whole scene indistinct. Drooi, impatient for action, trumpeted and did his little dance-step. Gault sent him trotting to one side and forward, to get clear of the dust.

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The witch doctors emerged beyond the tribes and undulated toward the sphere. It was then Barayun saw its reaction. If he hadn't happened to glance at the right spot, he would have missed it. A point in the great curve, opposite the witch doctors, kneaded and became clear. Then it snapped inward and became dished in. It stayed clear for a second, the black dust moving around it, then the dust swirled up through it. But it still remained concave and held its position. Barayun sat tense, waiting for some awful bolt to shoot out of it. But it remained motionless.

The witch doctors didn't seem to notice it, and after a while they gave up, crestfallen. The dished-in spot disappeared as they trudged back up the slope. It came to Barayun that the thing might have been an eye or an ear, and he wondered what would happened had someone put an arrow into it. He was surprised later to learn that Gault hadn't seen it at all.

THE warriors became weaponeers, and began building a large number of ballast-powered catapults and preparing stone ammunition. There was also a prodigy of arrow-making, a ship having brought in some timber fit for shafts and some extra bronze.

About five days after the witch doctors' performance, Gault took Barayun by the arm one morning and said, "Come."

Barayun could tell that he wanted to be away from Hulj. He went without questions. When they'd climbed out of the canyon and were mounted on Drooi, Gault said, "Best be out of sight for a while. There's bad news."

"What manner of bad news?"

"Renne has spread a story of Hulj's dying and has taken the throne. Had we not made plans we would not even know of it. As it was, my men barely escaped quarantine and came down the river by small boat. Hulj will be furious at me on general principles; and at you because you are not an army of Aleyn. He'd counted on Aleyn's allegiance to give Renne pause."

"I don't understand," Barayun said. "How can Renne hope to replace Hulj? Hulj is still popular, and—."

"Aye," said Gault, "and Hulj is trapped in the north. There'll be no supply caches to help us on a return trip. And Renne will move south somewhere."

"But there must be some way to . . ."

"No doubt, no doubt. But we shall not find it this year. I think we will winter on this island, if the Demon lets us, and that it will not be easy even next year." He began to grin. "I wish I could

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have watched when Renne discovered he did not have the treasury."

"He does not?"

"No. Secretly, we brought it along."

WHEN they returned to camp Hulj gave them glares but said nothing. The second time he looked at them, he seemed even a little amused at Gault's prudence.

The word did not leak out to the armies for a week, and by then Hulj was ready with a proclamation to take the sting out of it. He made it sound as if next year's campaign to catch Renne would be high adventure.

There were three dozen monster catapults set up on the slope of the hollow, capable of hurling stones bigger than a man's head; and two hundred lighter ones to be moved closer in, with sleds to be laden with the ammunition.

The general plan was to keep hurling stones at the creature until it died or went away. Only a fraction of the men would be needed, so columns were sent far south to seek winter quarters and to learn where game was the best; and also to assess the island as a possible route home. Another strong contingent was embarked with two dozen mammoths and some women to sail southwest and establish a base where a wild and icebound peninsula, not too well known, might offer livable conditions. The few known tribes there paid tenuous fealty to Hulj.

The bombardment began. Gault and Barayun watched for a while, then went on another tour of the nearby positions. Morale was still good, though everyone wanted to know when Gault thought they might start home. They visited the two closest ports, where work was under way preparing for winter. An impressive navy was gathered to the island by now.

It was noon of the second day when they got back, to learn that the bombardment had been going on steadily. They watched the monotonous rain of stones. Each missile produced a dent and a clear spot, was expelled smoking or shattered to fall to the ground. There was quite a ridge of debris collecting in a circle around the thing, which was a little shrunken compared to its largest size but not obviously hurt.

Explorers from the south returned with news that there were growths of trees within four days' march, and that there was warm light rain there which had brought out a burgeoning of vegetation wherever the soil wasn't washed away. That moved Barayun to ask Gault if there were weather reports from other directions.

"Aye," said Gault, "no doubt there are; since scout galleys de-

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ploy to the east, west, and north. Why ask you?"

"We have found showers, even during the summer, everywhere but here. Does it not seem this creature has created a dry spot around itself?"

Gault looked surprised. "Indeed, it does. We shall demand of Birk at once what the reports are."

WHEN the evening meal had been eaten and the sun was low in the north, a conference was held as a result of Barayun's question. Hulj listened, then said, "Well, it appears then that it has created a warmth all over the north, clear to the end of the earth for all we know; and space within a day's march or half a day's sail all around it where there is no rain. How does that help us?"

"That I cannot say, my lord," Barayun answered, "But I have toyed with an idea. . . . If it does not like rain, we might attack it with water."

Hulj's eyebrows rose a little, then fell. "And how would you procede? There are not enough water-bags in the army to more than moisten one slope of the hollow; nor are there rivers near enough to divert."

"No, sire. But there are glaciers within two days' march. Mammoths could draw blocks of ice; and there are places around the hollow where reservoirs can be created by simply throwing up temporary earth dams. And the catapults might hurl chunks of ice."

Hulj turned to Gault. "What think you?"

"I cannot wait to try it, sire," Gault said, his eyes belying his mock seriousness. "Ice; yes . . . And in addition, perhaps some of my stoutest men, well bloated with mead. . . . And we might hurl mammoth dung at it, too and . . ."

Hulj grunted. "I too have an idea to contribute. We will bind Gault on a mammoth and drive him into the thing; that it may laugh itself to death at his jokes." He pondered for a moment. "If the rocks have no effect in another day, we will prepare to try this foreigner's idea. It is embarrassing I can not find one brain without importing it."

Barayun was amazed at how nimbly the mammoths were handled in the glacier country. Evidently this kind of terrain was not strange to Hulj's men, nor to the beasts. Routes were chosen such that huge blocks of ice could be tugged downhill most of the way; and where uphill hauls were unavoidable, special stations were set up with extra teams of mammoths for a shuttle. The strange processions moved steadily. There was plenty of ice,

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though clearly less than there had been in the past, and gradually a vast field of it accumulated around the hollow. Below the dirt dams which held the melting, four channels were dug into the hollow so that the water, when it was released, would flow quickly. Slides were prepared so unmelted ice could be pushed down the slopes.

IN twenty days no one had patience enough to prepare further. The mammoths began shoving blocks of ice to the slides. Where the slope leveled out, the ice was formed into rough dams. Now the reservoirs were opened and water gushed down the channels to back up behind the ice. A little, finding its way through or around, trickled down close to the creature and turned to steam. Now the ice was steaming, in the creature's warmth. A block broke free and went skidding closer in the mud. An audible hissing arose as it began to melt fast.

Cracking sounds began, and the ice dams began to yield. The last of the water from the reservoirs was still piling up. More and more was running down near the creature, which was now slightly obscured around its base by clouds of steam.

Something gave way and a rush of water moved in close, under the curve, where it boiled away fast. The steam rose higher now, until only the top of the sphere was undimmed.

Gault signaled and the catapults began hurling ice. Each chunk made a dent and turned to a small cloud of steam, instantly, to add to the curtain of vapor.

The ice was going fast, and the hissing was loud and constant now. Steam welled up above the top of the creature. The pillar of smoke thinned and changed color. Gault cursed delightedly. "By all the gods! This is the way to make it squirm!"

Suddenly there was a great uprush of smoke and a ripping sound. Dark burbles blended with the steam. A black object, vaguely egg-shaped and no larger than a mammoth, shot up straight into the air. The fiery column, glowing, toppled out of the curtain of steam and came crashing to earth. A sound like the splitting of hell battered at Barayun's ears. Smoke and steam and bits of earth exploded upward in a terrible cloud. Through the din he heard Gault shouting, "Back! Back!"

No one needed much persuasion. Drooi was stumbling through the mud where a reservoir had been. The earth rocked beneath them. Something large and hot sailed by to plunge into the mud. Drooi skidded around it. Barayun shot a look over his shoulder and saw white-hot gouts of lava spitting up from the

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smoke and steam, and boulders hurtling.

This was a true volcano, but fortunately a limited one. None of the rocks or lava came very far, and already the earth's trembling began to grow less. Men kept scrambling out of the smoke. Some must have been trapped.

Gault's horn and Drooi's trumpeting called a rally where the canyon started down to the fjord. They found Hulj and Dalna there, about to dismount and take the foot trail. The king turned and eyed Barayun with an odd expression. Finally he said, "Red-haired one, the Demon seems to have gone. I would not have complained at your coming alone, had I understood that you have Bedlam at your beck and call. Were you to trade blows with the Devil himself, I do not know which side I would rather be on."

Barayun flushed and started to make some disclaimer. Then he stopped, mouth open. Since he was facing north and everyone else was looking at him, it was not surprising that only he saw the black thing hurtling toward them. He found his tongue again. "Yonder," he said, "comes your Demon. Perhaps to administer revenge."

THERE was no time even to get Dalna to safety; the thing was upon them. At the instant Barayun thought they would be crushed, it halted abruptly in mid-flight and hung over them. A grating voice thundered out. "Persistent fools! Do you insist on being exterminated?"

Gault gasped, then said, "It . . . speaks. . . ."

"Any why not?" The voice seemed to come not from the black egg itself, but from a point in the air a little closer. "Have I not been listening to your chatter long enough? Why have you made such nuisances of yourself?"

No one could answer for a moment. Barayun, who was not inclined to be belligerent but who saw no use in grovelling, finally said, "You have been ruining our climate."

The thing paused as if studying him, or perhaps readying some death-bolt. Then it grated, "You are the one who shot a sample of iron into me. Was there any significance?"

Barayun, feeling hope now that the thing was at least pausing to talk, said, "I come from a different land, where we work iron. I recognized that your own nature was in some way related to iron. It was a—a test."

"Is that all? I thought you might be trying to communicate. Yet you do speak with some rudiments of intelligence. Know, then, my nature. My real being is not visible to you. What you see

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now is a seed I am preparing. I must hibernate for a while, as do some animals of your world. In some thousands of your years I will be reborn complete from this seed. To build my seed, I must winnow through great amounts of your world's iron to glean a tiny fraction that I can use. That is what I have been doing since long before you were born. I should be finished before now, had you not disturbed me. When I discovered I was interferring with your climate, I already had cause to be annoyed with you, and that is why I have not ended the disturbance. Now listen well. I do not want to spend the strength to war upon you now, so I am going to a new place to finish my seed. If any of your kind bother me again I will delay long enough to exterminate you. Leave me in peace, and I will not have much more effect on your weather. When I am reborn I will decide whether to teach your descendants a lesson. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Barayun, not willing to risk more.

The black egg rose and dwindled swiftly to nothing in the northern sky. Barayun, staring after it, thought to reach for his compass. It pointed with only a faint tremor after the creature.

He turned to find all of them staring at him. Gault alone did not look much abashed. "Well," said Gault, "I for one have a great thirst for mead."

THE next morning Hulj wanted to see Barayun alone.

The king was a little flushed and hesitant, but finally he said, "I have spoken harshly to you once or twice."

"And I with you, sire," Barayun said, "On my part, I hold no ill-will."

"Thank you," said Hulj. "Also, I misjudged you badly at first. Not one of us has more wit and courage."

"You are too kind, my lord."

"There is a great favor I would ask."

"Anything, sire."

"Humph. No more volcanos, please. What I would ask of you . . . Well, finding our way out of here and chasing down that renegade is going to be a task, even if we survive the winter. We do not know what the weather will be now. I do not wish to subject my daughter to such uncertainties." He shot Barayun a look, then plunged on. "Think you she might find a haven in Aleyn? Have you that much standing with this council you speak of?"

Barayun nearly fell off the couch he was sitting on. "Why—uh—why, my lord; I am certain of it. Aleyn would not think of denying hospitality to such as your daughter."

(*continued on page 126*)

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By WILTON G. BEGGS

Illustrator BLAIR

After 25 years the man-boy returned, god-like, with his goddess, to show the hags who were his daughters how well he had adjusted. But the hags knew all about . . .

ADJUSTMENT

NIGHT rain hammered the only inhabitated building in the vast, ruined metropolis. Since the first massive slave hunts the cities of Earth had slept. Except for the glow of a fireplace a homemade candle lit the great room in which Lola and Nan sat. Howls lengthened, and Nan peered up from her needle.

"Soon. Soon, my dears."

Lola pressed a hand to her blackened teeth, and smiled. Nan dropped a ball of half-rottened thread, the needle, and a crocheted doily into a basket. She trembled impatiently, her wasted body shadowing a wall shaggy with paper. Knobby fingers wandered a ravaged face.

"When he led the Great Ones into the shelters, what was Mother to do?" Lola asked, expecting no answer. "Not our safety from

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the germs, nor the chains, but adjustment was his bribe."

Lola stroked her ragged skirt tenderly, remembering how they had hidden long ago, living under debris until the prisoners departed for Zorahu. Nan prized at the logs with a poker. The sagging roof roared with rain. Howls filtered throughout the bare, ancient mansion.

"Love has its adjustments also," Nan jested. "Her love for him lives. We have our duty to that love."

They laughed wildly. At length, in pain and loneliness, they sang the songs composed during many sequestered nights. Rhythmically and by rote they chanted of continents sowed with plagues unspeakable. They crooned of survivors, and traitors, and the enslavement of a world.

WHEN the songs were finished they unfastened the knot of hair at the back of their necks. They shook their heads with sorrow. Greasy gray waves fell below their shoulders.

"Souls be bartered," Nan murmured in the fashion of long habit. "The remnant of his people he sold."

"The old to the sacrifice," Lola counted sadly. "To the celebrations and the triumphs and the abattoirs of Zorahu. But the pretty, the clean-limbed, the young! Death is slow for such as they."

The howling faded like a phantom on the gale. A pounding began. Nan held the candle aloft with a quivering hand. The sound grew louder. They limped into a hall hung with crystal chandeliers. Faded dresses swept the dust marring a marble floor.

"I offer you adjustment," a voice called. "Rejoice! I shall take you to glorious Zorahu, under gracious suns."

Lola fumbled with a rusted latch. Rain flared into the hall, billowing tenuously about the wreck of a staircase. A handsome youth crossed the threshold. Slim and straight and tall, he wore streaming robes of elaborate richness. A golden girl followed him. She recoiled from Lola and Nan.

"Great One!" Lola wailed, as the boy sprang forward to embrace her. "Who are you? I am juiceless, unfit for harem or brothel!"

Candle tallow pattered the dust. "The webs are manifold," Nan gasped. "Our father returns a stripling."

"Know you not our science?" The golden girl's accents were harsh and arrogant. "Beasts, all portals are open, all things possible to citizens, be they Zorahu-born, or aliens adjusted to the empire."

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Her bracelets jingling she would have struck Lola then for pleasure, but the boy stayed the slender arm. His flawless face was clouded. Tears fell from limpid eyes.

"Pity a man's misfortune, my daughters. On Zorahu I possess concubines beyond number, but my loins deny me a son to carry forth my rising name. The germ raids dried my fruitfulness beyond a restoration. So be it, you remain my flesh. The Council is kind: physicians shall make you beautiful. Husbands you shall have for my sake, and my loyal line will not perish from the Galaxy."

Lola and Nan bowed in reverence. Thrice their palsied foreheads knocked the floor.

"A messenger informed us of your coming, my father," Lola said humbly. "We did not think you knew we lived."

LOLA grimaced in fear at memory of the messenger. She and Nan had fallen on their faces when he approached down the tree-grown street. Though the nearest Zorahuite outpost was a thousand miles away, they knew much of the guardsmen stationed there. The Great Ones shunnned the crumbling cities, preferring the open areas once farms and woodlands. Bored and restless, each spring confiscating flocks of comely boys and girl from seed herds wandering Earth, the golden warriors dwelled in compounds with walls like gleaming glass. There they awaited the ships that bore the sex slaves away to Zorahu, heart of the galactic empire.

"Marvels he brought as gifts from you, my father," Nan said wonderingly. "Foodstuffs we had forgotten. Truly, services rendered the masters reap a bountiful harvest."

"I am wet and chilled," the Zorahuite girl said, sneering. "The ground car lent us to enter the city was old, as is everything on this sick ball of mud. The slave wrecked our vehicle many blocks away, and my darling rightfully beat him for his carelessness. That I regret, for the Earthian died while attempting to make repairs. Never have I walked so far, nor amid stranger noise."

Meekly Lola and Nan led the visitors into the baroque room of the fireplace, over fine carpets browned by age. Lola poked the logs, and a burst of sparks showered the marble hearth. The man cast revolted eyes about him. He fluttered a cloth fragrant with perfume.

"Blame your mother, my children." He sighed and sniffed fastidiously. "A poor wife, but I loved the fool. I would have saved her, even after she condemned my surrender of the tun-

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nels. No Earth female has intelligence. Zorahu does not buy them for their brains."

His friend tittered. "Man or woman, anyone or anything that cannot adjust to the empire does not survive."

"Exactly," said the former mayor gravely.

The girl wheeled to the blaze and sprayed the fire with her feathery hair. Her robes caressed a lithe body, shaping a figure more rounded and graceful than Nan or Lola had seen since the days of freedom before the first germ raid.

"This lady is Noata," their father said with much pride. "Daughter of Gospi of the Council, and niece to Sher, Lord of Agonu. On her birthdays five hundred males alone are sacrificed to her family's glory. Never, till now, has one of such pure blood loved an Adjusted from Earth."

Noata's perfect teeth gleamed. "My devotion is proved forever by this journey. Adventure I wished, and adventures I have found! Neither the jungles of Agonu, nor the deserts of Megga, are so desolate as this foul planet."

"Fetch food and drink," the man-boy commanded lordly, and his rings glittered in the firelight. "The best given you, my daughters. Such gifts are nothing, with what you shall have. At dawn we walk to the edge of the city, there to summon aid from the nearest patrol. But now Noata is weary. She must eat and sleep, for the patriciate of Zorahu is unused to hardship."

WHILE the Great Ones yawned and stretched and spread bright clothing toward the flames, Nan and Lola tapped their foreheads against the floor again. Three times they touched the carpet, then retreated, bowing as they went. When the door was closed they crept down the mirrored hall, but halted, and Lola tiptoed back. She sank timidly toward a keyhole of tarnished brass.

"Animals!" her father spat, fondling his mistress against his naked chest. "Not since I toured the abattoirs have I witnessed such hags, Noata. If they cannot be rejuvenated and adjusted, and bear me male descendants, I must destroy them. This ugliness is not to be endured."

"Beauties you expected?" laughed the lady, as she kissed his silken lips. "I cease to wonder that our warriors believe Earth's cities haunted. The night noise is but the cry of ghosts catching sight of the corpses who remain alive."

Lola went silently down the hall into a cobwebbed kitchen lined with electrical appliances. Weeping, she walked to a board-

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ed window, and opened it upon the wind and the darkness and the unseen, empty, endless ruins. Nan was warming food and boiling liquid upon a wood-burning stove. A candle sputtered beside her. She took powder from a mildewed container high on a shelf, where it had waited many years. She sprinkled two discolored cups.

* * *

Lola and Nan slipped out a back door of the huge house. Protected by a hood of tin a torch fumed in Lola's hand. A knife, tied to a wire, dangled upon Nan's sunken bosom. Rain fell in waves.

They carried something between them. They stumbled with the weight. They moved slowly over rubble, as if through a pleasant dream. Scuffing across a fallen metal gate they went out into a park rank with weeds and scaling statuary. In the middle of the park a mound reared from viscid soil.

They laid the burden down. Lola swung the torch along a side of the protuberance until it rested on a door. An iron rod held it fastened. She slid the bar out, and with Nan's aid pulled the complaining cover open. Howls, and a stench incredible, ascended.

Nan drove the knife into the drugged Noata. They dragged her forward. The lady of Zorahu tumbled down, down into unfathomable folds of a velvet blackness.

NAN and Lola rose early, moving softly from their bed of rags on the kitchen floor. The rain continued. Low clashes of thunder rolled ponderously along the broken back of the city. They were preparing a meager breakfast when they heard sounds of their father from the hall.

"It is nigh," Lola whispered. "Give him that which he seeks."

Nan donned a coat of blighted mink. Lighting the torch at the stove she limped outside. Her coughing faded into a fanfare of rain.

Gliding with athletic vigor the man entered the kitchen haughtily. Sleep had kneaded his boyish face into that of a godling. His rich robes drifted about him, glowing with a life of their own in the dismal room. When Lola had bowed he seated himself at a splintered mahogany table.

"The child of Gospi is fearless," he boasted, twisting his rings. "Already she explores, despite the superstitions of the guardsmen. She slipped from my arms before I waked." His fair smile faded, and he gave a start as a noise very like a shriek floated somewhere in the rain. "My daughter, what signifies

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the sounds among the ruins of Earth? The Council ponders several theories."

Lola did not seem to hear his question. She went slowly to the battered stove and removed a pot from the yellow flame.

"Your gifts are infinite, my father. I had forgotten the taste of coffee."

"Last night," the man said, musing, "I dreamed. The soldiers delight in tales. On lesser looms are nightmares spun."

Lola's thin back was to him as powders fluttered into a cup. She came, and kneeling, put the cup into his supple hands. She watched him thoughtfully while he sipped the liquid. When half was gone she rose, and did not touch her forehead to the floor.

"Now let the veils be sundered," she hissed, dull eyes unblinking. "I speak of my mother now, when you were gone in the ship of slaves: she found herself with child. That winter famine roved, and in her search for food she begged of a patrol beyond the city. The warriors of Zorahu value beauty in heinous ways, my father. Later she crawled and babbled, and stuffed her mouth with grass and roots."

The Adjusted shook his elegant head. He listened to another, closer howl. His fingers flashed along a blanching brow.

"Downward she escaped to madness," Lola said softly. "Into the forsaken tunnels once again. Into the shelters of the days of plague and terror. The betrayed caverns remain, my father, and the germs with which Zorahu conquered have sifted there, and lie hidden, and fester and breed. And work most dreadful miracles."

In the dimness Lola drew herself to her full height. She leaped upward by inches. Passion shone upon her withered face.

The Great One clapped his hands to jeweled ears, and the howling mounted hideously. The cup toppled. Liquid blotted the table in a muddy streak. He swayed, his robes flowing. Making rasping bleats he clawed the air. His chair crashed backwards. He fell to the roughened floor.

"The pits yeast," Lola said shrilly. "The herd women steal to us by night, and are delivered there. Our armies grow, for they who bear among the germs, my father, bring forth vengeance. In time we go against the Zorahuites, and free beloved Earth."

The torch held high in a knobby fist Nan strode triumphantly into the room. Water stained her coat and raveled at the shredded hem. Something bawled behind her, shuddering the very walls with fright.

"Come!" cried Nan and Lola. "Come, O General of the Earth!"

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It filled the door from side to side. It stooped to enter, and the smell it brought the house was ghastly to the human mind, but not half so horrible as the Thing itself. It advanced relentlessly, hawkishly. A gruesome nightmare come to life. And there was no recourse from its all encompassing horror.

"Rejoice, my father," Lola commanded the whimpering wretch upon the floor. "Earth provides for her own survival. This is your adjusted son."

THE END

THE DEMON OF THE NORTH

(*Continued from page 119*)

Hulj looked even redder, and finally forced out, "How about your king?"

Barayun couldn't suppress a grin now. "Why, sire; he growls about you much as you growl about him; and I think with no more real bitterness. He will surely not hold the grudge."

Hulj sat down and let out a long breath. "Well, then. Rather had I gone out begging meals from huntsmen, but I knew not where else to turn. What of your own relations with your king? Are you in such disfavor with him that your escort would weigh against Dalna?"

"Disfavor?" frowned Barayun. "Oh. You misunderstand the relationship between king and Council, my lord. The king is subject to the Council, but there is no hostility. It is a normal relationship of government." He tried not to look smug. "As for my own relations with the king, they are quite good. We are second cousins, or some such."

Hulj stared, then broke into laughter. "All my worry was for naught, then. When you are ready to go, there will be galleys suitably manned."

The year being well along, it was thought best to leave soon. They travelled across the island to embark at one of the new ports.

Two galleys full of warriors went ahead. As Barayun's galley pulled away, Hulj, Birk, and Gault, all mounted on Drooi, waved good-bye. Drooi seemed to understand he would not likely see Barayun again. Long after distance blurred out the meaningful grin on Gault's face, Drooi's trunk was lifted in farewell.

Barayun glanced at Dalna, where she stood with her handmaidens at the rail. She did not look at him, but her face was slightly pink and he thought she did not stand as far away as she might have.

THE END

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VANITY, THY NAME IS
(*continued from page 85*)

I moved up on it. I kept quiet, making sure it didn't turn in my direction.

"And now the fair Clarissa," said Hatch's voice. The pistol lifted and aimed into the ballroom.

I dived at where I figured he was and chopped at the pistol. The gun went off into the ballroom floor and I tried to knock Hatch down. I was lucky and connected with his invisible chin. He groaned and fell.

The Merrihugh guests had stopped dancing and were lining the windows to the terrace. I rolled Hatch over and sat on him.

Emily came out from behind the urn. "Are you all right, Bert?" She frowned. "You seem to be floating in air and the back portion of you is blurred."

"It's the emanations," I said. "Look. Keep the guests in there and see if you can get the police over here. Have them get hold of Plumrose. He's with Inspector McAfferty someplace."

"Yes," said Emily. She bent and kissed me. "I'm proud of you, Bert. You seem to have solved this all, whatever it is, completely by yourself."

"Plumrose and I figured it out," I said. "Now get the police."

Underneath me Hatch was coming to. "The snobs," he said. "The dirty snobs." **THE END**

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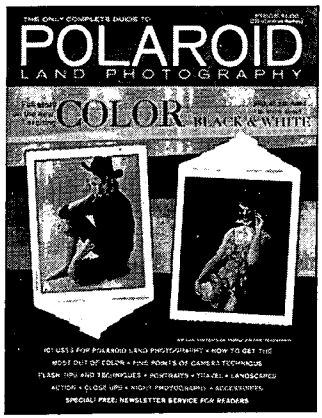

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